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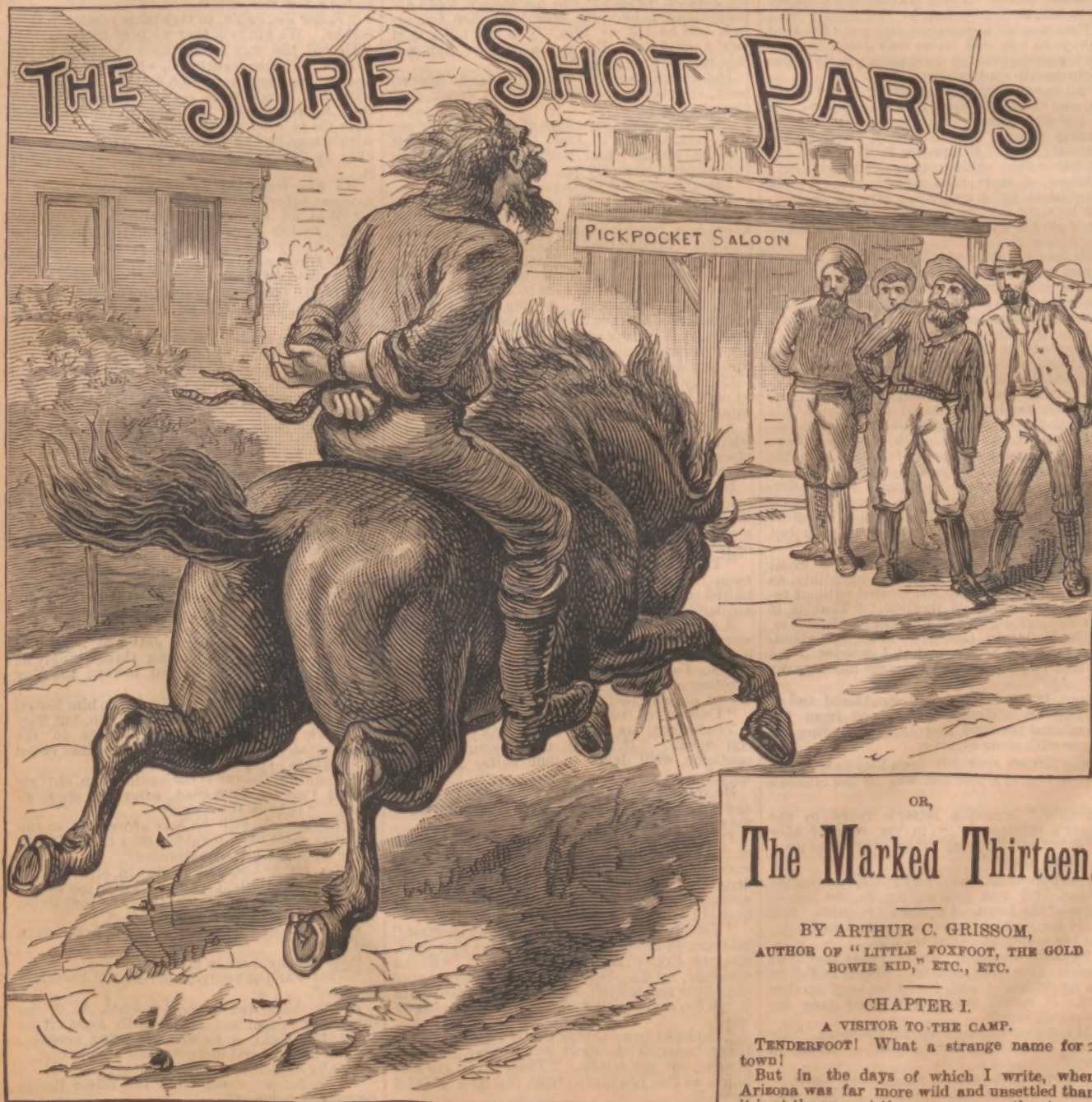
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OR,
The Marked Thirteen.

BY ARTHUR C. GRISSOM,
AUTHOR OF "LITTLE FOXFOOT, THE GOLD
BOWIE KID," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A VISITOR TO THE CAMP.

TENDERFOOT! What a strange name for a town!

But in the days of which I write, when Arizona was far more wild and unsettled than it is at the present time, many were the strange names given to those towns, which, like Tenderfoot, "sprung up in a night."

THE ON-COMING RIDER WAS SOON NEAR ENOUGH FOR THEM TO DISTINGUISH HIS FEATURES, AND THEN HIS NAME WAS UTTERED IN ACCENTS OF SURPRISE.

The camp—Tenderfoot was nothing more than a camp—had originally been founded by a young prospector, fresh from the States; he had discovered gold there, staked out his claim and erected his shanty.

He had little more than done this, however, when Mountain George, with a dozen companion desperadoes at his back, rode up to the cabin one night, dragged the young owner from his bed and hanged him to a convenient tree. The desperadoes at once took possession of the place as their own, laid out claims and roughly marked off the town.

Gold proved to be no scarce article, and in a short time the inhabitants of the camp numbered seventy-five or a hundred souls.

It can readily be imagined that it was not a very delectable crowd that gathered there. Coming as they did from all parts of the Southwest, they composed one of the motliest collections of humans ever found in the confines of a town. Officers there were none, and the bowie and the revolver were the only authorities respected.

Mountain George and his roughs never organized a Sunday school in Tenderfoot. On the contrary, they soon gave the town the name of being as hard a place as there was in the territory. They ran things to suit themselves, and their ways were wild and wicked ways. They shot to kill, and they bought bad whisky with gold that was not always honestly got. Ere long a graveyard was well under way down the valley, where were planted more than a few victims of their deadly six-shooters.

By all means the most popular resort in the town, and the one favored by the roughest class, was the big saloon and gaming-den run by Mountain George himself, called, and very appropriately, the "Pickpocket." This was the place where the working miners had their pockets picked of their hard-earned dust. It was accomplished by a gambling lay-out or two, which brought into the pockets of George, and a number of his associates, a constant stream of the camp's gold.

Such was the state of affairs when, one evening just at dusk, there drew rein on the outskirts of the camp a stranger of remarkable appearance. He had descended the trail which led northeast into the mountains, and he paused as if to take a survey of the camp.

He was above the medium height, and compactly built, with skin fair and smooth, hair and mustache dark and long, and eyes black as an Indian's. He wore the costume of an ideal sport. His sombrero was of gray shade, his boots high-topped and light, and his jacket and breeches, of some dark, rich material, were close-fitting and handsomely trimmed. In his belt were beautifully mounted weapons.

Handsome, strangely handsome, was Tenderfoot's visitor, and likewise the powerful black steed that he bestrode. Whence had he come? What was his mission?—Questions no man but himself could answer.

"I should say Tenderfoot makes no great pretensions to style," he remarked inaudibly, as he noted the rough shanties, located without regard to uniformity of position. "That is, if this is Tenderfoot, and I am quite certain it is. This is Mountain George's new stronghold. Things are quiet here now, but I wonder if the place won't be stirred up before the moon grows dark! Ah!"

A man, bronzed and broad-shouldered and of form like an athlete, had stepped from the cabin nearest the trail and stood regarding the stranger with some surprise.

As the latter's eyes fell upon him he spoke to his horse, and in a moment was by the citizen's door.

"Evenin'," was the latter's reply to the stranger's salutation. "On yer way ter ther royal suburb ov Tucson? Then hyer's thet identical saints' abode."

"Yes, I want to visit Tenderfoot," responded the rider. "I was just taking in the classic features of the town. I notice all is quiet. Is it possible Tenderfoot has become religious?"

The big miner smiled at the idea. "It's early, stranger. Don't judge ther boys too quick: give 'em a chance. They'll be full ov p'izen by midnight and ready ter keep up ther record. It would insult ther pesky gang ter call 'em religious."

"I'll not insult them," smiled the sport. "By the way, I suppose you're a pard of Mountain George?"

The brow of the bronzed rough grew black. "Wal, no," was the answer; "Mountain George an' me never nitched, ner never will, fer thot. They call me Rough Rube, but by

thunder! I never war rough enough ter suit ther taste ov this yer' camp's boss."

The visitor pondered a moment in silence over these words, as if they had made an impression upon him, when, suddenly, Rough Rube stepped forward and laid his hand heavily upon the stranger's leg.

"See hyer!" he exclaimed, and his eyes glowed with anger, "you may be a friend ov Mountain George's, fer all I know, but since you've called up ther subject you kin have my frank opinion ov him, free of charge. Ther's not a more sneakin' galoot in ther kentry than thet same Mountain George, I say it! He deals in a kind ov coin that will be returned ter him some day in a way he will despise. Ther's a number ov us down on him. Why, it ain't been a week me an' three pards laid Poker like away with one ov Mountain George's bullets in his life-box. He war a good feller, but he liked poker too well. He lost his money an' his life at ther Pickpocket. But he ain't ther only one thet's traveled thet road. You've doubtless heard ov ther way bizness is done hyer, stranger?"

"The town has a bad name," was the reply. "I should judge Mountain George was a good subject for a Regulators' picnic."

"Thar never war a better," grated Rough Rube. "He'll figger in such a picnic one day. By Jupiter, stranger! I'm his enemy, tooth an' toe-nail, an' I long fer ther day when Tenderfoot will be rid ov him. You kin tell him ef ye'r a mind ter. I'm not afraid ov him ner ther rest ov ther gang."

The rough removed his hand and stepped back, and before the visitor could speak, continued:

"Ride on inter ther camp ef yer want ter see ther sights. You'll find ther gophers' nest straight ahead," and with that the brawny Rube turned abruptly and re-entered his cabin. The sport started his horse forward.

"There's a man I will have use for," he murmured. "I might have got some information about him, but the chances are the miner knew nothing. I'll find the 'gophers' nest'."

On, straight into the heart of the camp he rode, while the shades of night were falling fast about him. His keen eyes took note of everything as he advanced. At the same time the expression of his face told that he was thinking deeply, and it appeared that his thoughts were not pleasant ones, for often his brows would contract and his eyes burn fiercely.

Finally he drew his steed to a halt, dismounted, and hitched him in the rear of a deserted cabin; then he continued his way on foot.

A few moments' walk took him to the door of what seemed to be the largest building in the place, and which was situated in the very center of the collection of cabins.

He halted and looked in, for the door was open, as it was the warm season of the year. In the room, which was well-lighted, were nearly a score of bronze-faced roughs, loitering about or playing at cards.

"This seems to be the tabernacle of the camp, from the number present," decided the long-haired stranger. "Well, as I came here to get acquainted, I guess I'll go in."

A moment later the loafers of the Pickpocket were surprised at the entrance of a man with long hair, and in the rich dress of a sport.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," was the easy greeting of the stranger, as the glances of the crowd were leveled at him.

"I see no red ribbons in the crowd, so I take it Tenderfoot has never signed the pledge," he continued. "If you'll name your favorite medicine, we'll drink to our better acquaintance."

He walked straight up to the bar as he spoke, and threw down a heavy gold coin before the men in attendance.

This was the signal for a general movement on the part of the bystanders, for it was understood that no man ever gave an invitation to drink in Tenderfoot without having it promptly accepted, and every man of them went forward to drink to their "better acquaintance."

"Yer hits us whar ther wool grows shortest," said one, as he edged up. "We take ther pure, straight Rocky Mountain tanglehuf, without seasonin', we do. Sorry thar's not more ov ther boys hyer ter imbibe with yer, but ther truth is, it's too early in ther evenin' fur ther most ov 'em."

"I'm right in supposing this is Tenderfoot, am I not?" queried the sport as the bartender was pouring out the drinks. "These parts are new to me, as I'm just down from the New Mexico mines."

"Yas, this ar' ther angels' roost known as Tenderfut," was the reply of the rough. "It's

been now nigh six months since Mountain George an' a few ov us fellers found gold hyer an' staked out claims. This place is Mountain George's lay-out, called ther Pickpocket."

"Not a bad name, I should say, for a gambling place," smiled the stranger. "Well, boys, here's to Tenderfoot and—*Captain Sure Shot!*"

Did a half-dozen men start on hearing that name? It seemed so; but the glasses were emptied in short order.

CHAPTER II.

THE PICKPOCKET.

"You is squar', pard, an' Tenderfoot ar' proud ov yer visit," said he who had previously been speaking, as the glasses were returned to the bar with signs of satisfaction.

"That's a fact, Bowie Joe," echoed a man at his elbow; "Cap'n Sure Shot bez acted white."

But, there were some in the rough crowd who did not nod or speak assent to these opinions, and they were those who had seemed to start when the sport had mentioned his name.

The latter only smiled in a queer way as he replied:

"Perhaps you will not think so when you have known me longer. But, Bowie Joe, I wish a word with you in private. Where can we retire to for a few moments?"

"Foller me, cap'n, to ther table yonder in ther corner. We kin talk thar without listeners."

He led the way as he ceased speaking to the part of the room mentioned, which was deserted, and where they were soon seated face to face, with the rough table between them. Captain Sure Shot sat with his back to the wall, and with his face toward the dark, shirt-sleeved men with whom he had just drank. This was probably by design, but Bowie Joe never suspected it.

He was regarded by the keen-eyed sport a moment before either broke the silence.

"Wal, let loose yer word-flipper," said the rough, rather uneasily, for he did not like to be gazed at by this man, whose presence there, he was beginning to think, might mean more than was at first supposed.

Captain Sure Shot leaned forward with his elbows on the table and responded in a low tone:

"I merely wanted to ask you some questions about Tenderfoot. You will answer them?"

"Why, I guess so, stranger, bein's it's you. An' I reckon I can do it ez well's any man in camp, ez I war one ov ther first thet struck pay-dirt hyer."

"First," came the question, in an off-hand manner, "who is the leading man of the place?"

Bowie Joe grinned.

"Any idjit in ther Nugget kentry could tell ye thet; it's Mountain George. An' speakin' further, ther second best man is a feller ov about ther size an' figger ov yours truly, Bowie-Knife Joe!"

The captain did not continue his questions for a minute; he was quietly taking note of the maneuvers of an evil-browed rough at the opposite side of the room, though not appearing to do so. The man was speaking in a low, quick tone to a number of his companions gathered near him. Soon he ceased, and glancing threateningly at the stranger sport, he walked toward the door and quitted the saloon.

The men who had been listening to him looked suspiciously at Bowie Joe's companion, but they only saw him talking unconcernedly to the camp's "second best man," with eyes that roved everywhere except toward them.

"Mountain George is the leading man, eh?" repeated Captain Sure Shot, after the short silence. "Is he in the room?"

"No; though he'll be here afore long, to run his little game ov win-an'-lose-ov-ther. Do yer want ter make his acquaintance?"

"Yes, for as I intend to stay in or near Tenderfoot for awhile, I want to know the people here. You say you were in the gang that he led to this place about six months ago?"

"Yas, cap'n; I war ther second man ter stake out a claim."

"How many were in the band?"

"Thar war jest twelve, not countin' Mountain George."

Again there was a short silence, as if the questioner's mind had momentarily gone off on some other topic, or he was reflecting preparatory to another and more important question.

Finally he said in a pleasant way: "You fellows came from the Silver Range country, I believe?"

Bowie Joe started, as he answered.

"No, Pard Sure Shot; we come from Miner's

Fork, which had played out. Mountain George had once saw signs of gold hyer whar Tenderfoot now stands; so he led ther way hyer, an', sure enough, we found ther yaller stuff. Ov course, arter thet it warn't long afore there war a town hyer."

Again there was a pause as Captain Sure Shot looked thoughtfully about the room.

Presently he turned his eyes full upon the rough, and gave him a scrutiny which the fellow did not understand, and which made him feel strangely uncomfortable. He was already beginning to mistrust this handsome but keen-eyed stranger, from his very appearance and manner, and especially from his last question. And, somehow, Bowie Joe became impressed with the idea that this was not the first time he had seen the peculiar flash of those dark and dangerous-looking eyes; but, it was only an impression; he could not remember where the instance had occurred and he put the thought aside.

The next question was startling, and certainly to the point.

"What became of the man you found here?"

The Tenderfoot rough again started, while his eyes evaded for an instant those which regarded him so steadily. But, quickly, his self-possession returned, and he responded, with every show of earnestness:

"We found no man hyer, cap'n; us thirteen war ther first men thet ever camped hyer, ez far ez I know; at least, thar war nary a sign ov a human when we come. Every man in ther camp will tell yer thet, pard."

"Then every man in ther camp will lie?" was the response in low, fierce tones. Don't I know why this town has the name of Tenderfoot? A tenderfoot was found here. Yes, there was a man here, and he was dealt with foully, for which the so-called founders of this town will have to answer. Be quiet, Bowie Joe; the time has not yet come for a disturbance!"

Bowie Joe had drawn back in anger and amazement, with one hand clutching the edge of the table and the other moving threateningly toward his belt.

"I've come to Tenderfoot to-night for a purpose," Captain Sure Shot went on, transfixing him with his penetrating gaze, "and that is, to tell you that justice is near at hand—that a certain murder and theft shall soon be terribly avenged. I prepare you for it, that you will know what it means when it comes. It may not come all at once—it may be slow, but it will be sure—it will be deadly. The thirteen ruffians that hanged a man here six months ago are marked men from this night. Tell your pards what I say, Bowie Joe; tell them they are doomed—that the vengeance of a just Heaven is close upon them and will overtake them. Tell Mountain George all this—that, though we have never met we are deadly enemies. There—keep your seat or you're a dead man! I've got a revolver under the table leveled at your heart!"

Bowie-Knife Joe was a desperate man when aroused, and he had made a movement as if to leap to his feet and draw a weapon; but at this last warning he resumed his seat and relinquished his weapon with alacrity.

He realized that before him was a daring and inflexible man, who meant every word that fell from his lips. He had dealt with such men before, and well enough knew that they were worse than hot coals to handle. Therefore, he thought it best to listen and heed, for he doubted not the truth that he was covered, as the sport did have one arm extended beneath the table.

But he was filled with fierce rage.

"Yo'r a darned idjit ter talk an' act this way in Tenderfoot!" he exclaimed. "Sech threats is death, hyer!"

"Death to you, if you attract the attention of your pards there!" was the stern warning. "Wait until I'm gone, Joe, before you tell the Marked Thirteen of my mission here. Then tell them—tell Mountain George especially."

Just then, at the sound of a voice, Bowie Joe turned his head, and the sport followed his gaze, and saw enter the saloon the evil-browed rough who had left some time before, preceded by a stalwart and villainous-looking tough who walked in with the air of a proprietor.

Bowie Joe turned to his companion with a look of triumph:

"Thar's Mountain George—tell him what yer kim hyer for—if ye dare!"

He received no response. Sure Shot was watching the movements of the man called the leader of the camp; but at the same time, he could see every act of the man he covered, at the opposite side of the table.

Mountain George questioned in a low tone the man who lounged about near the bar. He was

answered by looks and gestures toward the corner where sat the sport and Bowie Joe.

The eyes of the two—Captain Sure Shot and Mountain George—met in a searching, steady gaze for a moment; then the king-pin of the camp strode forward directly toward the stranger.

The long-haired sport coolly kept his seat, his right hand still beneath the table, while the other hand remained carelessly resting on the rough boards, and the midnight eyes fearlessly surveyed the mountain desperado, as he approached and halted but a few steps away.

The number of men in the room had increased rapidly in the last few moments, and they all crowded forward, expecting that some sort of trouble would take place.

And they were not disappointed.

CHAPTER III.

OLD FOES.

A POWERFULLY-BUILT man was Mountain George, and heavily armed, as was every man in the room. He looked the desperado that he was, and his face wore an expression not pleasant to behold. Especially was he dark and forbidding as he advanced and halted by the side of the table, and laid his horny hand upon Bowie Joe's shoulder.

"They tell me a man from ther Silver Range is hyer," he said, addressing his pard and looking him in the face.

"Heavens! Not from the Silver Range!" ejaculated Bowie Joe. "Thar sets a man from ther New Mexico mines; he's ther only stranger hyer!"

"Wal, he's from ther old battle-ground," replied Mountain George, never looking toward the subject of his words, who, of course, heard everything that was said, as it was intended. "Yer didn't recognize him, er yer wouldn't be talkin' with him in this fashion. He's not from ther New Mexico mines—he's hyer from ther old Silver Range, an' fer a purpose. I know this much—he's ther deadly enemy ov ther camp!"

Bowie Joe knew this, too—that he was a foe to the Tenderfoot pards—but the news that he was from the Silver Range was startling to the whole crowd.

Neither he nor Mountain George glanced toward the sport, but they were conscious that his position was unchanged, that he was coolly and silently listening to their conversation.

Joe also knew that the revolver still covered him, though unseen by any, and that a too free use of words might cost him his life. And he was wise and discreet enough to withhold what had passed between Captain Sure Shot and himself, for he had been warned not to divulge it until the captain was gone.

"No, pard George, I hain't recognized him," he said, affecting perfect unconsciousness. "Yer say he's from the Silver Range, but I never saw his face afore."

"That was because he kept it masked."

"Jerusalem! Masked Dan?" Bowie Joe exclaimed.

"Thet's him, Bowie Knife!" was the quick response. "He's took off ther mask, an' changed his name, an' come hyer no doubt ter finish ther work begun thar—at ther Silver Range? But Whisky Jack an' some ov ther boys hed heard ov ther change, an' when he called himself Captain Sure Shot he give himself dead away. Captain Sure Shot war Masked Dan ther Champion Regulator, once, the foe ov ther Bowlder Band!"

With his last words Mountain George looked straight at the sport, who returned his gaze with interest.

"You've come ter ther tigers' den, Masked Dan," the big rough went on, addressing his enemy, "fer we're all men-tigers hyer. We run like curs from ther Silver Range, but what's left ov ther Bowlder Band, little ez it is, is worth more hyer than ther hull band war thar!"

"Well, that wasn't much!" Captain Sure Shot smiled; "it wasn't, if you're a specimen of it. You accuse me of being Masked Dan; what is your proof of that?"

Mountain George uttered an oath.

"We don't need no proof," he replied, fiercely; "Whisky Jack heard thet Masked Dan had turned himself inter Captain Sure Shot, an' you don't deny it! Ef it war proof we wanted, them eyes ov yourn would furnish it. I would hev recognized yer anywhere by them! I don't see how yer fooled Bowie Joe. Yer bein' hyer is not sech a surprise, fer we've rather been lookin' fer yer since Tenderfoot started. Ov course yer've come ter finish what was begun in ther Silver Range. But yer a fool ter come—we'll

carry ther war ter kingdom come this time. Thar'll be no runnin', unless it's on your side."

Captain Sure Shot seemed the coolest man in the crowd, which had increased to at least two-score. He had not moved from his seat, and his face was as calm as ever. But there was a dangerous light in his midnight eyes, which told of his indomitable spirit.

The sport was in a trap; behind him and on either side was the wall, and before him, blocking his only avenue of escape, were Mountain George and the men who were ready to do his bidding. But he was not in the least daunted; he had been in tight places before, and had always escaped unscathed.

"You think you know, then, the man whose face you never saw?" he said to Mountain George. "Well, so be it; but I will tell you one thing—this is not Masked Dan; Masked Dan and his business with the Bowlder Band was left in the Silver Range. Captain Sure Shot is here, on different business from what you think. Bowie Joe will tell you what it is. It's not the old fight renewed, but it's a new one begun!"

"An' ther Masked Regulators—are they hyer?"

"No; the Masked Regulators were also left in the Silver Range; the Sure Shot Pards are here."

There were thirteen men at least in the sound of his voice who understood his meaning, and the same thirteen involuntarily quaked at his words.

Had they not cause? They had dealt with this man before, when he was known to men as Masked Dan, and when he was captain of the Masked Regulators—men whose very name was a terror to desperadoes in the Silver Range.

They, the remnants of the Bowlder Band of road-agents, had fled from him there, to escape total annihilation at his hands. Now he had followed them to Tenderfoot as Captain Sure Shot, and with his old Regulators, the Sure Shot Pards, at his back.

Is it to be wondered at that their bronze cheeks paled at the intelligence? His had been a merciless war against the Bowlder Band, and over half of them had been hanged in the name of the law. They—the thirteen—had survived—had escaped him once; but would they again?

Mountain George was at a loss for words for a moment after the sport's startling declaration. A hunted look came into his eyes as he drew back before the burning gaze of those orbs he knew so well.

He had said that Captain Sure Shot and his band had been expected, but their coming, just the same, was a terrible surprise.

In a moment, however he was himself again, and his face grew dark with passion.

"Ther Sure Shot Pards hev come ter Tenderfoot ter die!" he almost hissed, bending forward suddenly toward the sport. "Whether it's ther old fight er a new one, we've run fer ther last time, an' will fight ter ther last man! 'Tain't only ther thirteen ov ther Silver Range that are hyer—thar's at least forty ov us now, an' we're worse ner lions ter tackle! Some ov us hev got a big grudge ter settle, an' ther work ov vengeance fer ther old Bowlder pards we swar ter make terrible! We'll begin it hyer an' now! You've walked inter ther trap, Sure Shot Dan—you warn't expectin' ter be recognized, when yer took ther fatal step that brought yer hyer. But, yer'll feel ther claws ov ther tigers ter-night, ez we swore yer should ef yer ever come!"

Strong words—words that most men in such a place would quail before; but not so the fearless sport.

The interior of the Pickpocket presented a wild scene. Neither Captain Sure Shot nor Bowie Joe had left their seats, and the former faced with steady nerves the mad men who had him cornered.

Only an instant elapsed ere he replied, and his words were sharp and ringing:

"I've been in wild dens before, Mountain George, but the tiger's claws have never clutched me! I've sworn with the Sure Shot Pards to wipe out the Marked Thirteen, and I shall live with them to do it! We care not for the forty—it's the Thirteen for the crime of six months ago; thirteen men are marked for death and twice forty men-tigers could not prevent the blow of vengeance falling! Stand aside, men; that I may reach the door!"

He made an imperative motion with the hand visible above the table, and his expression was stern and threatening.

Some of them moved, but others crowded forward in their places, and they were the men from the Silver Range.

There was a look of triumph on the face of

Mountain George, for he felt that at last his dread foe was at his mercy. For years he had longed for this very time, and now it was come!

But for the moment he had forgotten the nature of the man he was dealing with.

Seeing that his command was not to be obeyed, Sure Shot suddenly leaped from his chair, and then with a cat-like spring landed with his feet upon the table.

The following instant his arms were extended, each hand clutching a glistening revolver; there was a rapid succession of flashes and reports, a fearful shattering of glass, and the room was wrapped in darkness!

His movements had been so sudden and unexpected that the ruffian band had been powerless to intercept him ere his work was accomplished. They had lost in surprise the moment for action, but, when they found themselves in darkness there was a general rush toward the table.

Several shots were fired; then the utmost confusion followed. Every man took his neighbor to be the escaping sport, and they grasped and fought and held each other accordingly. Wild cries, occasional shots, oaths and the sounds of scuffling were heard in all parts of the room.

When at last a light was produced a dreadful scene was presented, but withal a ludicrous one.

Several men were prostrate on the floor with the knees of pards planted upon them, while others were engaged in desperate struggles; many had received bruises in the melee, and one had been wounded by a bullet.

The light quickly brought an end to the confusion; the mistakes were discovered and things were restored to order.

Mountain George scrutinized every face in the room, and a fierce imprecation escaped his lips when he saw that the foe was gone!

The succeeding moment a man staggered into the saloon, with the blood from a wound on the head covering his face.

He halted before the Tenderfoot pards, and Mountain George uttered an exclamation of surprise:

"Whisky Jack!"

"Yas, cap'n," was the reply of the discomfited rough. "I've been intermate with Sure Shot Dan ag'in."

"Whar is he now?" was the quick question.

"Gone—escaped! Slipped through our fingers like the devil thet he is! He's clean out ov ther camp by this time."

"An' did he lay yer out?"

"Wal, kinder," was the grim retort. "Ther minit ther lamps war shot out I made fer ther window thar, thinkin' he would try ter git out thar instead ov at ther door, an' I war right. I recognized ther Champion Regulator by ther way he come ag'in me, an' my hand closed on his throat. But, he seemed ter be a giant in strength, fer he wrenched himself away in a wink, at ther same time bringin' his shooter down on my head with all his might. He knocked me clean out ov ther shanty, an' jumped over me as I fell; then he shinned it down ther trail in ther dark."

There was a prolonged curse from the Pick-pocket roughs at being so outwitted, and then a prolonged drink at the bar followed, as balm for their wounded feelings.

After this, Bowie-Knife Joe proceeded to make known to his pards what had passed between himself and the escaped sport.

It was not the old war renewed, but a new one begun!

CHAPTER IV.

THE CABIN IN THE GULCH.

THE morning sun had just arisen above the eastern horizon, and was gilding the mountaintops with its golden flood of light. Nature was fresh and sweet from the night's repose, and the gentle breeze of the dawn was cool and bracing.

Well up among the mountains, in a secluded and fertile spot, and near a crystal stream that galloped merrily downward to the plain, was camped a number of hardy and fearless-looking men.

There were ten in the party all told, and they were up with the morning sun, attending to the handsome horses that were picketed near, and cooking their fragrant morning meal.

Among the number, as handsome and as richly dressed as on the night before, was Captain Sure Shot. When I say this, it can be readily imagined who are his stalwart associates; they are the Sure Shot Pards—the old Masked Regulators of the Silver Range, the destroyers of the lawless Boulder Band.

The men, with the exception of the leader, were dressed similarly in dark, serviceable suits, and armed to the teeth. Their movements were indicative of superior strength and activity.

When the breakfast of wild meat, bread and coffee had been dispatched, the captain equipped the noble horse that he had ridden to Tenderfoot, and mounted, preparatory to leaving the camp.

"I go to the cabin in the gulch, Lieutenant Dodge," said the long-haired sport in parting, "to make a report of my visit last night to the wolves' camp. Remain here in quiet; I shall return ere noon."

Lieutenant Dodge bowed, and Captain Sure Shot turned his horse's head and rode away down the mountain-side.

He followed the Tenderfoot trail until it branched to the left, leading in an easterly direction.

Taking the branch road, an hour's gallop took him to the entrance of a lonely-looking gulch, to the bottom of which the rays of the sun had not yet that day penetrated.

The ground was sterile and rocky, and being little worn, showed that it was traveled over by few. The sides were high and uneven and half-covered with moss and stunted bushes.

The captain rode into the gulch without a moment's pause, and followed its sinuous course for quite a distance.

Finally he turned off from the main gulch into a branch one, up which he rode at a steady gait for a short time, and then he came in sight of the "cabin in the gulch."

It was a small but substantial building, of logs and bawn boards, and seemed to have been erected quite recently. It was built well back under an overhanging ledge of rocks, and near it, from these rocks, a tiny stream of crystal water spouted, forming a beautiful spring.

Captain Sure Shot rode up to the door, which stood open, and then a smile lit up his face as the figure of a young girl appeared on the threshold to meet him.

She was the last creature one would expect to see in that wild region of gold and revolvers. That she was pretty, a glance sufficed to tell. She seemed to be about nineteen, and her features were regular and fair, with eyes and mouth that were slightly inclined to an expression of firmness. Her eyes and hair were nut-brown in color. Her form was rounded and graceful, and clothed in a dress that was plain but well-fitting.

A smile of recognition lit up her fine face as the handsome sport rode up.

"Ah, captain, is it you?" she asked. "I heard the clatter of your horse's hoofs, and knew not who it could be so early in the day. Please dismount."

"I will, for I have news for you," the captain replied, and he at once leaped to the ground.

His horse was left standing unbitched, for, well trained as he was, there was no danger of his wandering beyond his master's call.

"Your father is not here," he said, half-interrogatively, as he reached the door and glanced into the cabin.

"No," was the reply; "he left a short while ago with his gun, saying that he wished to secure some fresh game. Come in, Captain Dan, and tell me what you have learned, for I am anxious."

He accepted the chair which she placed for him.

The cabin was of two rooms, and comfortably furnished. The furniture was rough but substantial, and everything was neat and in order, plainly giving evidence of a tasteful feminine hand.

The girl took her seat near the captain as he said:

"The fight has commenced, Clara. I went to Tenderfoot last night and found out the lay of the land. I found that there were thirteen in the band headed by Mountain George, the leader of the old scourges of the Silver Range, that rode up to John Wilkes's cabin on a night six months ago. The town is planted on his claim without a doubt, and the gold they use was discovered by him, and is, therefore, rightfully yours. I found the Thirteen there, none of them, rather strange to say, having been killed since the town started. I told them they were marked men, and that the crime committed six months ago would be avenged."

A look that was a commingling of sadness and hardness had settled on the face of the girl as he was speaking. Her eyes were bright with deep feeling as she regarded her visitor with keen interest, taking in every word that he spoke.

"How many have they gathered around them?" she asked; "and are they of the same desperate character?"

"I should say there are seventy-five or eighty men in the camp, from what I have learned; but I think half of them at least are law-abiding and honest, as Mountain George himself intimated. It is generally supposed that the Thirteen were the original founders of the town, so the others do not know that they are handling stolen gold."

"There is no doubt that my poor brother was murdered, then?"

"No, Clara; I think the report that reached me accidentally, in the Silver Range, and which I at once sent to your father and yourself, was entirely true," Captain Sure Shot replied.

There was a short silence, and then he continued:

"Poor John! Heaven knows I wish the report was false!"

"How long was it before he came here that you saw him?" Clara asked, with downcast eyes. "You told me once, perhaps, but I have forgotten; and the subject is so dear to me I must know all concerning it."

"Not more than a month," was the answer.

"When he left you in Texas, chance brought him to the Silver Range, where I saw him and at once recognized him, although we had not met in so many years. He did not stay long with me, for he was in quest of a fortune and impatient to be on the move. He was full of hope when he left me, starting off alone, well equipped and well armed. That was the last I heard of him until a flying rumor informed me of his death."

"And I am thankful that you at once notified us. With a fixed determination father and I have come here for justice, and with your kind help, captain, we shall have it."

"I am truly glad to be of aid to you, Clara," said the Regulator, in a sincere tone. "This cabin, which the Sure Shot Pards erected for you, will serve as your home, while we shall secure for you the gold discovered by your brother and which is yours. At the same time, as organized Regulators, we shall strike blows for vengeance that will rid Arizona of thirteen of its most desperate characters. It may be a long fight, but it will be a bitter and deadly one. With right on our side we are bound to win. The old Masked Regulators handled many of their band as lawless and desperate as they, and the Sure-Shot Pards are equal to every emergency."

"Pursue your own course, Dan," said the fair girl, "father and I trust all to you, and whatever we gain will be through you and your noble 'Pards.' But you must be careful, or you will lose your lives; will not the majority of the town fight for Mountain George and what they may call their own right?"

"It will be impossible to tell that at present," responded Captain Sure Shot. "I shall pick out those of the better class and win them over to our side, and then the odds will not be so great. I saw the Thirteen last-night, and I know every one of them."

"Did they not recognize you?"

"Yes, they did, somewhat to my surprise, for I was always masked in the Silver Range, as was my whole band, for we found it better for Regulators to be so. But some two or three of them had heard of my becoming Captain Sure Shot, and they at once knew me."

"And certainly, hating you as they do for breaking up their band, they did not let you go free quietly?"

"Well, no," the Regulator smiled; "they had me, in fact, cornered, but I played the old trick on them of shooting out the lights, and in the darkness and confusion easily escaped. But, Clara," he continued, rising, "I must leave, for time is precious and there is much to be done. Ah! there is your father."

Through the open door at that moment they saw approaching a man who bore a gun on his shoulder and some small game in his hand.

James Wilkes was a medium-sized man, with erect figure and kindly though time-saddened face, for the loss of his fondly loved wife and son had told heavily upon him. His beard and hair were prematurely gray, but he was by no means infirm. A minute later he was greeting Captain Sure Shot cordially.

"Indeed, Dan, you are not leaving?" he exclaimed. "I had hardly expected you, or I would have remained at the cabin. You brought us news?"

"Yes, Mr. Wilkes," the captain responded; "I came to report my trip to Tenderfoot last night. Clara will tell you that everything was found as expected. And now I will be off."

They insisted on his remaining longer, but bidding them a cheery good-morning, he mounted his waiting steed and galloped down the gulch.

CHAPTER V.

BRAZEN BILL.

As was before remarked, the camp of the Sure Shot Pards was in a secluded spot on the mountain-side, a place remarkably well adapted by nature to just this use. Behind it, and on one side, arose great insurmountable cliffs, while on the other side was the ragged edge of a frowning chasm, whose waters seethed and moaned far below. From out the rocks and between the camp and the chasm ran the little stream before mentioned, rollicking noisily along on its downward course, and eventually tumbling into the chasm in great silvery showers.

The camp was thus accessible from but one point, the front, making it indeed a desirable spot for the purpose it was now serving. Being fertile and of ample size, and at a height to command a good view of the country before it, it was the one place in the Nugget country suitable for the camp of the Sure Shot Pards.

A few hours after the departure of the captain, and shortly before noon, an individual stood on an eminence overlooking the camp surveying the scene with interest. Quite a distance lay between the two points, more than a rifle-shot, and his view of things was not over plain.

He was a person whose figure would excite attention anywhere, for he was almost a giant in stature, and heavy throughout. To gaze at him one would give him credit for enormous strength. Indeed he was a peculiar specimen of humanity. His face was covered with sandy, unkempt beard, which met his long, coarse hair at his ears. From out this barbarous growth shone his big, bloodshot eyes—villainous-looking eyes they were, and cunning, too. There was a short, blood-red scar on his nose and upper lip which much enhanced the unprepossessing appearance of his face.

His clothes were in keeping with himself. Worn and dirty, it was evident that they had befriended him for many a day without the much needed attention. He possessed in the way of arms a savage-looking knife, which graced his belt in handy reach. Bag and baggage he appeared to be without.

From the elevated spot upon which he stood he could see the movements of the Sure Shot Pards as they lounged about the camp, passing the time away as best they knew how, while he, on the other hand, was scarcely visible as he stood near a large bowlder which shielded his body.

It seemed that he had climbed to that high point to take observations, for his discovery of the camp appeared eminently satisfactory, and he surveyed it with all the eyes he had. The distance was so great, however, that with the naked eye he could distinguish little save the forms of the men and horses. But from his expression it was evident that he knew the meaning of what he saw and that his knowledge was pleasing to him.

"Brazen Bill never misses a guess!" he exclaimed, addressing himself, as he leaned on the rock and allowed his big eyes to take in the scene. "Brazen Bill, ther cyclone ov ther Silver Range, miss a mark? Nay-o, by ther ghouls ov Tophet! Things are jest ez I expected ter find 'em, when I started from ther Silver Range kentry fer ther new pastures ter renew ther old sports. Thar's ther camp ov ther pesky Regulators, ez sure ez I'm a laughter-lipped rose ov Kilkenny! Great Josh o' hornual I hev arriv' on ther scene, me noble, panting heart. I, ther great Brazen William, duke ov seventeen kingdoms, am come. I am now nigh unto Tenderfoot an' Mounting George, who mebbe won't be glad ter see me. Also ter Masked Daniel, fer whose sake I shook ther Silver Range once fer an unlimited period. But them things are all in the past, an' thar is now new biz afore ther house. Hyer comes ther double-action bracer."

The giant drew up from the cavernous depths of one of his pockets a well-known kind of bottle, and held it up before his eyes. His face fell as he looked at it, for but a few drops of its precious contents remained. He contemplated it a moment in mournful silence.

"Great hiyankidanks!" he ejaculated at last. "So little ez thet? It must hev leaked out in me pocket. Nay-o—not thet, er me iron-clad heart would be consumed with grief. Some danged thief stole it while I war sleepin' on ther trail las' night. Ghouls o' Tophet! me appetizer is

gone, an' Tenderfoot afar off! But down she goes!"

And up went the bottle with its neck in his mouth, retaining that position until the last drop of its contents was exhausted.

Then, with a half-drawn sigh of satisfaction, he dropped the glass vessel on the rocks, where it was shattered in pieces.

"Ther las' drink afore Tenderfoot is reached," he soliloquized; "ther las' sup afore I git ter Mounting George's burg. Whar thet place is I don't jest know at present, but straight on I reckon is ther way. My glorious blue blood is leapin' ter sight ther town."

He glanced all about him to get his bearings, as if locating the town where he expected to see Mountain George. He stood in a picturesque spot on the mountain, a few miles northeast of Tenderfoot. Below him, in the beautiful and fertile valley, wound a dimly outlined trail, which he had left for this high point to take observations.

"I've jest got ter continue thet trail ter git ter ther Tenderfoot town," was his conclusion; "I've jest got ter foller thet a little longer ter find Mounting George an' whar's left ov ther old gang. But, strange ter say, dang my blue blood, I've got a bankerin' ter see me old pard, Masked Daniel. Thet's ile from ther can. Thar's so many pleasant reckerlections connected with us two. Do I remember our parting? Wal, somewhat! It war a jolly occasion fer everybody except Brazen Billie. I war playin' ther spy fer ther Bowlders, an' doin' it great, when ther Regs got out me. Daniel war inclined ter hev ther regulation neck-tie picnic, an' it war only by me givin' ther stronghold away thet he let up on this ijee. Then it war thet he give me a short, fleetin' spell ter grow scarce, ter hie myself out ov ther Silver Range kentry. Which, by ther great hiyankidanks, I did. Ner I didn't show up ag'in, ez we agreed, until he war safely gone. Then they told me thet he am ther Sure Shot Pards, ther old Regs, hed come ter ther Nugget kentry ter renew ther old sport with Mounting George, who also hed ter vacate ther Silver Range when ther Regs got out ther stronghold. Then it war thet me steel-clad heart panted fer ther old companions, an' I journeyed down hyer. I'm not certain Mounting George will welcome me, but I've got ter be a great humpin' grizzly from ther great North Pole, a bad man proud ov me record, an' ef he seeks ter settle up old scores he'll hev ter chaw me up, fur an' all. Dang my blue blood, I love peace, but when I git riled I make ther mountings tremble an' belch forth sassage! I've seen ther old ocean double up an' heave with ther colic when I war in a bad humor. Mebbe Sure Shot Dan don't know thet. I've a lively hankerin' ter see ther lovely sinner an' his black-faced devils. I think I could strike up ther old friendship by tellin' them I hed reformed. Thar's ther camp over thar, jest ez I expected ter see it, an' Mounting George is not fur off. S'posin' I could git in with Dan an' George both; by yankidanks! thet would suit me, an' thar would be good times ag'in fer Brazen William. Dang it, I'm ez dry ez a box ov bran. My kingdom fer a good sup of tanglehuf."

His hand involuntarily went down into his pocket in search of the coveted bottle, but only a soul-saddening emptiness rewarded his quest.

"Sech is life in great cities," he mourned. "My rich blue blood turns green with envy when I think ov ther old drinks in ther Silver Range. Ther only way out ov ther difficulty is ter git ter ther Tenderfoot's roost, I see thet, unless Masked Daniel hez a spare drop. So ther best thing I kin do is ter be movin'."

He took a last look at the camp in the distance and then left the bowlder and made his way down the incline to the trail below.

Back a short distance and to the left of the trail, hitched in some undergrowth that nearly concealed its form, was a fair-looking steed which had borne Brazen Bill on his journey.

The giant led forward the horse and mounted him, and spurred away toward Tenderfoot, his huge and ungainly proportions causing him to cut a most unenviable figure.

He took note of his surroundings as he advanced, and finally when he came to the rough path that led up to the camp which he had sighted shortly before, he turned his horse into it. He had evidently made up his mind to face all dangers and pay Masked Dan and his pards a visit.

"Now, me noble heart," he muttered, "we'll see what effect ther appearance ov a gent with genuine blue blood will hev on ther natives, I'm a-thinkin', by gravy, thar'll be some surprise, but whether it'll be pleasant er not I'm unable ter say."

He boldly urged the horse up the rocky, uneven trail, keeping his eyes and ears open as he advanced.

Ere long he received a sharp command to halt, which he promptly obeyed. A man stepped out from behind a tree with a repeating-rifle in his hands.

"Thunder! Brazen Bill!" he ejaculated.

The giant grinned cheerfully.

"The same, me lovely chromo. You remember me, I see."

"Well, yes," was the reply of the guard; "I was with Masked Dan when he interviewed you on the propriety of clearing yourself out of the Silver Range."

"Wal, I cleared, an' I'm hyer, in ther Nugget kentry, an' thought I would call around an' see me old acquaintances. Yer may hev been present when Daniel an' I las' parted, but since yer fergot yer mask ter-day, I don't recognize yer. Is Daniel ter home?"

The giant was perfectly easy in his situation and spoke with grave assurance. His brazen effrontery had probably given him his name.

"Cap'n Sure Shot is not hyer," said the old Regulator, who stood directly in the path, with his rifle half-raised. "What do you want?"

"Wal, I jest thought I'd like ter see ther boys once more, ez I war passin'. An'-yer hev'n't got an extra bottle ov ther old Silver Range dew, hev yer?"

"Nary a drop, Brazen. It's not allowed in the camp. I don't think the boys want ter see you. You had better make yourself scarce around hyer."

"I ain't ready ter go yet," was the complacent response of the giant. "I've reformed since we parted, an' am anxious ter git under good influence. If Dan ain't hyer I kin wait till he comes, an' we'll talk over ther old times. Lead me inter ther camp er let me go on alone."

"I'll do neither. If you want ter see the boys I'll bring them here."

The next minute the man uttered a shrill whistle, and the Sure Shot Pards soon came hastening down the trail in a body.

Brazen Bill and the guard were not in sight of the camp, the view being obstructed by the uneven ground and the undergrowth.

The few hundred yards intervening were quickly cleared by those who answered the call, and almost before Bill realized it, he was the center of a group of mountain men, whose deeds had made their very name a dread to border law-breakers.

He was somewhat disturbed in spirit at the unexpected proceedings, and probably regretted his action in approaching the camp. But the name which he bore was by no means misapplied, and he continued to wear a bold face.

The men without exception recognized him.

"This is Mountain George's old spy ov the Silver Range," said the guard, "the one we granted unlimited leave ov absence to about a year ago. He says he wants to see you fellers an' Cap'n Sure Shot. He also seems very anxious to inspect the camp."

"Ghouls ov Tophet!" exclaimed the giant, as he looked from his seat on his horse into the faces of the darkly-clothed men about him. "I ain't no spy, pards; don't think thet. I war only payin' yer a little friendly visit, ter see, mebbe, if yer hed a drop ov ther good old washee-washee in ther camp. I've reformed since thet little affair in ther Silver Range, an' thet's ile from ther can. I'm now one ov ther original hoary-headed saints ov Arizona. Mountain George an' me don't speak ez we pass by, an' dang my blue blood, I'm a gem ov ther first water. Ef I kin be ov any service ter you gents, I'm ready ter be called on, ef only fer ther sake ov old acquaintance."

"We don't need your services, Brazen Bill," said Lieutenant Dodge, who had been among the first to arrive on the scene. "Nor we haven't forgotten you in the least. We can see you have reformed, by yer changed appearance," he continued, ironically; "you look like a very ideal saint. Cap'n Sure Shot ain't here, and we want no visitors, especially you. I've sized you up as the same old cupping tough who vamped the Silver Range a year ago by request. You may hev to do the same thing by ther Nugget country!"

These were not pleasant words of welcome to Brazen Bill, but he preserved the same outward equanimity, as he replied:

"I'm not disposed to argue ther point, gents. I'm ther simon pure an' unadulterated, an' if thar's no royal welcome fer me hyer, I'll leave yer in peace. I wanted ter see Masked Dan, er Cap'n Sure Shot, ez yer call him now, but if he ain't ter home I'll go. Much oblige. Thet little

occasion in ther Silver Range on which I figgered so prominently made a man ov me, by ther great hiyankidanks, an' I never intrude myself on anybody. Ef yer ever want a favor don't hesitate ter call on me. Good-day."

He was about to turn his horse from the spot when Lieutenant Dodge grasped the bridle.

"Don't go for a minute, William," he exclaimed, "when we'll give you a start in the most approved fashion. We're too appreciative hyer to let you go off this quietly. We'll send you down the mountain in a style that will make you remember yer visit. Don't think for a minute that we think you an infernal spy; we just want to show you our appreciation of yer kind visit and kind offers!"

Unpleasant for the gentleman of blue blood.

CHAPTER VI. A ROUGH RIDE.

A MAN whose eyes were as black as an Indian's and who wore the rich dress of a sport, drew his black steed to a halt beside a trail that ran through a valley. No sooner had the animal halted than he bent forward in a listening attitude, and the sound of rapidly approaching hoofs fell upon his ear, coming from the direction in which he was going.

It was easy to recognize the handsome captain who was on his return from the cabin in the gulch.

The sun was high in the heavens, shining bright and warm.

Like a statue he sat his horse for a moment, studying the sound which had assailed his ears and which was growing louder each instant. Owing to intervening clumps of undergrowth and timber he could not see the approaching animal—there was but one, he knew—and he could not determine if it bore a rider. At its present rate of speed, however, it would soon burst into view.

Captain Sure Shot spurred his black horse forward into a thicket beside the trail, which effectually concealed man and beast from view. Then with his hand near a weapon he awaited the appearance of the oncoming animal.

He had not long to wait. Scarcely had he entered the thicket before he saw a small cloud of dust, and soon the horse came into sight. It was at full speed, and had a rider—a man of huge proportions and an aggressive stock of hair, and beard, and dressed in the rough garb of a miner.

The keen eyes of Sure Shot Dan scanned his features and then an exclamation burst from the sport.

"Brazen Bill!"

What was more startling, however, a fact that was ascertained when the wild horseman drew near, was that he was bound to the saddle with tough ropes, his hands tied at his back, leaving him powerless to control his maddened animal!

Was this the way the Sure Shot Pards had rid their camp of an unwelcome guest?

It was an old trick in the wild border land. One acquainted with it would know at once that if that saddle could have been raised, a sharp thorn would have been disclosed which goaded the horse forward at every move. The natural consequence of such a torture was that the animal would plunge ahead until stopped or exhausted.

Brazen Bill, this border Cossack, had a white face and an expression in keeping with his wild situation. The sequel of his visit to those men who could read him for what he was, despite his professions of friendship, was doubtless not very gratifying to the giant. He was in for a forced ride which might terminate it was impossible to tell how, perhaps most disastrously to him.

Mad howls of rage and fear fell from his lips as his wild steed plunged over the rough trail, and he tried in vain to burst asunder the ropes which bound him.

Captain Sure Shot took in the situation at once, and a grim smile played over his features.

"The devil is getting his due," he muttered.

The sport was not seen by the giant as his furious animal dashed by within twenty feet of the Regulator.

The captain had no intention of stopping the mad rider. He knew Brazen Bill of old, and doubted not that he was receiving a lesson well-deserved.

"That's not the first time he's left a place with the assistance of others," he remarked, as he gazed after the retreating rider. "It is pretty certain that he will leave this world yet with assistance. He's a man who would make Arizona better by passing in his checks. He's been in some devilment to-day, perhaps at the

camp, and the boys are giving him his deserts."

Lieutenant Dodge had told Brazen Bill that they were going to send him out of their presence in a way that would cause him to remember his visit, and this was the way. The giant was known of yore, they had not forgotten his career in the Silver Range, and they desired to rid themselves of him for good and all.

They had no faith in his so-called reformation, and they did not propose to be taken in by a minion of Mountain George who bore the character of a desperado and spy. They had no room for him in their camp, and they wished to impress the fact upon his mind, that they might never be troubled with another visit; and they were doubtless eminently successful in the carrying out of their intentions.

The giant was at the mercy of his maddened horse, and he could but endure his punishment and curse the authors of it. And while Captain Sure Shot turned his animal again into the trail, and continued toward the camp on the mountain, he, Brazen Bill, the man of blue blood, was suffering a hard ride over the rough valley, on the back of an infuriated animal that was taking him he knew not whither.

He cursed the thought that had taken him into the camp of his old enemies, and resolved on some means of revenge for their treatment. Filled with rage, he longed for the end to come.

But the end was not near at hand. The horse would never stop until exhausted or checked by force, and there was small hope of the latter being accomplished. It was destined to be a long ride for the Silver Range spy.

When he came to the place where the trail forked, his horse kept the main road—the one to the right.

On, on it dashed, goaded always by that sharp instrument of torture that was pressed into its back at every plunge.

The foam began to fleck its sides and its breathing was distinctly audible. But on, on, wild with pain it went.

Several miles were thus left in the rear. To Brazen Bill it seemed the ride would never end.

Finally the trail again entered the mountains, and up, up the rocky ascent snorted and plunged the tortured animal. Then on, over very rough ground, and down the opposite side at a break-neck speed that almost jolted the breath from the giant's body.

It was the trail which Captain Sure Shot followed when he entered Tenderfoot the night before, and ere long the rider caught sight of the town ahead of him.

This was not exactly the way he had anticipated entering Tenderfoot, which he took the place to be, but the sight of it raised his hopes, for it was more than possible that there his fearful ride would be brought to an end.

Some half-dozen men who stood near the cabins on the trail that entered the town from the northeast, were somewhat astonished when a foam-covered horse, bearing a giant rider bound to its back, came tearing down the mountain toward Tenderfoot.

They watched its approach in silence and with eager interest.

They wore the rough dress of miners, and their revolvers were in handy reach, as if at any moment they might be called upon to defend themselves.

They seemed to have been engaged in conversation before the disturbance occurred. Mountain George was among the number, and they stood a short distance from the Pickpocket, whose door, as usual, stood invitingly open.

The on-coming rider was soon near enough for them to distinguish his features, and then his name was uttered in accents of surprise.

Brazen Bill was not gagged and he yelled lustily for aid as soon as he was within speaking distance of the men of Tenderfoot.

They were motionless with surprise at first, but as the horse drew near they sprung into action.

Mountain George gave a quick command, the men leaped back on each side of the trail, and when the animal came within reach strong hands suddenly grasped the swinging bridle-rein and after a short struggle brought him to a standstill.

Quickly the torturing instrument was removed from beneath the saddle, when the tired beast soon subsided.

Brazen Bill's bonds were cut, and his long, hard ride was at an end.

He was sore and badly jolted up, but one of the men produced a flask in which he soon found relief.

"Angels ov Tartarus!" he exclaimed, when he could get his breath. "That's ther worst shaken

up ever experienced in ther Nugget kentry. I feel like a mass ov ruins. Dang my blue blood, I'm purty near a wreck. Cuss ther pictur's ov them devils! I'm a bad man proud ov me record an' I'll ketch even ef it takes till Joshua gits out his old horn ag'in. I'm a white elephant, I am, an' a terror when I'm riled! Another drink, pard, ov ther tulip salve. I war ez dry ez a peck ov dust."

Brazen Bill took another long draw from the flask, while the men who had befriended him regarded him with interest.

When he was again in condition to talk he greeted Mountain George and the others, expressing at length his obligations for their assistance. The former and two of the others, Whisky Jack and Brazos Pete, were his old pards of the Bowlder Band whom he had betrayed to the Regulators, and their greeting was not a very cordial one, as the giant was at once aware.

But he affected not to notice it, and as they said no thing about it just then he did not mention it himself.

"Whar in thunder did you spring from?" queried Mountain George. "Is this ther way yer hev taken ter travelin'?"

"Nay-o, I don't travel this way much," responded the giant rough, "I ginerally go by electricity. But ther Sure Shot Pards hev got a particular patent on this style ov travelin', an' they insisted on my adoptin' ther custom. Darn ther pictur's!"

"So yer hev been visitin' ther Sure Shot Pards?" said the king-pin of the camp.

"I diskivered ther camp on my way ter Tenderfut," Brazen Bill replied, "an' concluded ter pay 'em a little visit, an' see ther make-up an' so on. Ther welcome they give me warn't very pleasant, you bet, cap'n; they begun ter dig up ther hatchet ez soon ez they saw me. They called up our little misunderstanding in ther Silver Range a year ago, an' then come ter ther conclusion that I might ez well hump myself out ov ther distric'. So they devised this means ov tortur', an' in spite ov my arguin' an' swearin', they sent me on this critter agoin' down ther mountain. He got sech a start thet he couldn't stop till jest a minit ago."

The giant again had recourse to the bottle, after which he continued:

"Yer see, cap'n, when I went back ter ther Silver Range after you an' ther Masked Regulators left they told me yer bed come ter ther Nugget kentry, an' thet ther Regs war doin' bizness hyer under ther beautiful name ov ther Sure Shot Pards, an' thet Masked Dan bed come ter be Captain Sure Shot. Then an' thar I war possessed of a bankerin' ter see yer, an' be pards with yer ag'in, so I set out. I seen ther camp ov the Pards this mornin', an' ez I said, made 'em a little visit; an' dang my cast-iron liver, this thet yer saw war ther result. They don't appreciate a gent with genuine blue blood. They didn't know thet I'm an untamed grizzly jest from ther open Polar Seas, by ther great hiyankidanks. Thet's ile from ther can. I'm yer eternal slave, Mountain, fer seme tanglehuf."

"Wal, we'll go up ter ther Pickpocket. I never expected ter see yer ag'in after ther cussed Regs run us out of ther Silver Range, nor I didn't want ter much. Ef ther boys hed got hold ov yer about thet time they'd hev organized a first-class funeral in yer behalf. Ez it is, we hain't much hostile no more, an' ef yer pledge yerself ter fight fer Tenderfut, yer welcome hyer."

"I'll do thet!" said Brazen Bill, as the party walked toward the Pickpocket. "I've got me dander riz, an' I'm cravin' Sure Shot gore. I'm a bad man, proud ov me record. Ef thet boss he n't stuck ter ther trail whar would I hev been now? He'd a' killed himself an' me ter boot. Gimme ther drinks, Mountain, an' by ther ghoul's ov Tophet! I'm yours!"

CHAPTER VII.

WARNING AND DEFIANCE.

BRAZEN BILL was the first man astir in Tenderfoot the next morning.

He made his appearance from a back room of the Pickpocket just as the sky began to grow rosy in the east.

The night after his sudden advent into the town had been a gloriously hilarious one for him, for, filled with the camp 'red-eye,' he had indulged in every boast and antic known to him, threatening his foes, the Sure Shot Pards, with all manner of dire evils, and only desisting when a superabundance of liquor caused him to no longer want to disturb the town but to crawl off and sleep.

The sleep lasted until daybreak, when he arose

with the desire to refill himself with his favorite poison.

Nearly the first thing which attracted his attention was a large paper tacked up on the door of the Pickpocket in a conspicuous way.

It was a piece of white paper about the size of a half-sheet of common foolscap, and was covered with writing.

In the giant's present state of mind he was not apt to draw any important conclusions from the appearance of things, but it dawned upon his mind that this poster certainly meant something. He was not an adept at comprehending or deciphering written intelligence, and after a few moments spent in fruitless study of the characters, he drew off in disguise.

But he suspected that it was something of importance, and he resolved to bring Mountain George and others there who could read, and determine its meaning.

Accordingly he gave vent to a few characteristic yells that would have made an Indian collapse with envy.

The denizens of Tenderfoot, roused thus suddenly from their slumbers, soon began to show themselves at the doors of the shanties in the neighborhood. They were used to noises, early and late, wild drunken whoops and the like, but there was something in those loud yells of Brazen Bill's which told them that something was wanted, and they consequently sprung from their cots into the street, as it were, with the inevitable revolver in hand.

Mountain George was among the first to make his appearance, and in a moment, surrounded by a crowd that was rapidly increasing, he was reading the contents of the suggestive paper that was tacked to the door of his own establishment.

This is what it read:

"NOTICE.

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

Be it known that this town of Tenderfoot was never founded by Mountain George and his associates, as they claim, but by one whom they foully murdered for its possession. That consequently they, nor any other citizens of this place, have a right to a foot of the ground on which the principal part of Tenderfoot now stands, nor to any of the gold taken therefrom. It is lawfully and justly the property of the father and the sister of the murdered prospector, and it is the intention of the Sure Shot Pards to enforce their claim and bring the guilty parties to justice.

Mountain George and twelve of his well-known associates here, who committed this crime, are the remainder of a band of outlaws known as the Bowdler Band, who formerly operated in the Silver Range country. They escaped the halter only by fleeing to this place.

Now be it further known that the Sure Shot Pards do not wish to war upon those who are innocent of wrong-doing in occupying this ground, or who honestly desire to make reparation for their wrong to their rightful owners; therefore, those citizens who know their own good and who will help to bring Mountain George and his murderous associates to justice, will meet in the mountains when the moon rises to-night, on the trail that leads northeast from the camp. To all such, who faithfully serve the Sure Shot Pards in the execution of their plans, a just and suitable reward is promised. All others will be considered enemies and they should beware!

Signed

"CAPTAIN SURE SHOT."

Mountain George's brow grew black as he read, and when he had finished, a savage oath came through his teeth.

Brazen Bill stood just behind him, and around them a large crowd had collected, each one striving to master the contents of this startling communication.

"That's ther dirtiest job ever put up on a decent town!" hissed the king-pin of the mountain roughs. "Ther Sure Shot Pards will git ther sneakin' lie crammed down ther throats! Whar'd it come from, Brazen Bill? Who put it thar, an' when?"

"That's more'n I know, cap'n," replied the giant, who did not yet know its contents. "It war starin' me in ther face thar when I come around ter try ter git a drink. Dang it, Mounting, read it to us. What does ther dockymet say?"

"It says war ter ther knife!" was the mad reply. "Ther Sure Shot Pards hev put up a job ter clean out ther town, ter run us out ez they did in ther Silver Range; but Mountain George sometimes wins in a fight! Captain Sure Shot and his pards hev come hyer ter die! They follered us hyer with droppers in hand ter finish ther work begun in ther Silver Range; but it's ther biggest job ever undertook in ther mountains ov Arizona! Read it out loud. Bowtie Joe, an' let ther boys see what a sneakin' job it is."

Bowie Knife Joe read it aloud, slowly and

with difficulty, for though the handwriting was fairly good, his reading powers were so infrequently called into use that he could not readily exercise them.

He had barely finished the reading to the excited roughs when Mountain George exclaimed: "Thar's my answer ter ther Sure Shot Pards!" and he sunk a twelve-inch bowie through the center of the paper and deep into the boards of the door. "War ter ther knife it is!"

Then the door of the Pickpocket was thrown open, and the crowd, foremost among whom was Brazen Bill, gathered around the bar to "licker up," as the irrepressible giant suggested.

The notice from the Sure Shot Pards, which had been pinned up in the most conspicuous place in the camp by some silent and unknown hand during the early hours just preceding the dawn, naturally threw the town into a state of excitement.

Every person in the camp sought the Pickpocket, and those who were capable read and re-read Captain Sure Shot's significant proclamation.

It was discussed by groups of men in all parts of the camp. As the morning advanced it was noticeable that a division of the inhabitants was taking place—the rough desperadoes of Mountain George's stamp were collected around that worthy and his establishment, while the better class of citizens were congregated in other parts of the camp, not openly holding aloof from the others, but by natural instinct withdrawing from their rough society.

Work was almost entirely suspended by the miners, and there was little activity in the mountain town except at the bar of the Pickpocket.

Thus the day wore on and night came and spread her somber mantle over the land of gold. The stars came out in all their glory, and relieved the darkness in a great measure.

Mountain George had his spies at work. He had recognized the fact at the outset that an involuntary division of the camp was going on, but it did not startle him, for it was nothing more than he had expected. He knew that among the more honest class he had many silent enemies, who now that a favorable time was come would not hesitate to turn against him, and who, as soon as they were assured of the strength and purpose of the Sure Shot Pards, would readily lend their aid and influence to the Regulators' cause.

Of course, there were some whose opinion was not shaped either way. These, by mingling with Mountain George's minions and hearing their bold words, soon concluded that, whichever side was right, it was better for them to stand by Mountain George.

Under the cover of darkness the desperado was better able to carry on his work and make his plans.

Spies were busy throughout the camp, and a number were stationed on the outskirts to see that no one entered the place unobserved.

One of these was Brazos Pete, and he stood where the camp was entered by the trail from the northeast.

He had not occupied the position long ere he heard the tramp of a horse, which was approaching.

He leaned against the dark logs of a cabin in a listening attitude and waited.

The animal came nearer and nearer, its iron-shod hoofs giving out a metallic ring as they came down in regular tattoo upon the hard trail.

At last it was quite near and Brazos Pete could see the outline of the rider.

He appeared to be an old man of medium stature, astride a large and well-proportioned steed, both strangers to the camp.

The spy made no attempt to stop him, but kept his position and was passed unobserved.

The horse was reined into a walk, seemingly in the observance of caution.

Brazos Pete followed the horseman silently, determined to see what his visit meant.

He was led toward the center of the camp.

In the course of a few minutes the visitor dismounted, secured his horse to a convenient scrub-oak, and proceeded on foot.

He went on, glancing from side to side, evidently not in fear but in an inspection of the camp. While he did not court discovery he did not appear to care for it, and proceeded boldly until he came to the Pickpocket.

Near the door he halted and glanced in. Nearly two-score of men were in the room, engaged in drinking and conversation.

Then the paper pinned to the door with a twelve-inch bowie caught his attention, and he moved closer to read it. The door was open,

and to accomplish his design he must necessarily stand upon the threshold. Accordingly, he stepped forward in the full view of all and perused the notice with interest.

His appearance caused some surprise to the Tenderfoot roughs, but they made no demonstration, only watched him curiously as he read.

When he had finished, he stepped back in a matter-of-fact way, and continued on through the camp.

The more Brazos Pete watched him the more he became convinced that he was making a general inspection of the town. He finally turned to the right and made almost a complete circle of the principal part of the 'burg, and after quite a while, during which time Brazos Pete kept him well in sight, he made his way back to his horse and remounted. He had taken a complete survey of the mountain town, and was now ready to ride from it undisturbed.

He might be a spy of the Sure Shot Pards, for all Brazos Pete knew. It might be much to their interest to detain him in the camp.

It was a pleasant surprise when he suddenly encountered Mountain George, returning to the Pickpocket from a cabin in the vicinity.

He hastily laid the matter before the chief desperado.

"Let 'im go without a challenge," was the reply; "but get your boss an' foller 'im ter his den. He's no friend ov ther camp."

Shortly after James Wilkes rode out of Tenderfoot, after his bold inspection of the place; he was followed by Brazos Pete, one of the Marked Thirteen, who was also mounted and armed.

CHAPTER VIII.

A COMPACT ON THE MOUNTAIN TRAIL.

TWO score of dark, shirt-sleeved men stood on a mountain trail when the moon, a silvery hemisphere, came up two hours later.

They were in the mountainous district that intervened between Tenderfoot and the valley to the northeast.

They were the men of Tenderfoot who had come there in response to the message from the Sure Shot Pards which had been found that morning on the door of the Pickpocket.

They had not come in a body. They had in most instances stolen up one by one and two by two, as if they had not dared to make their intentions known to their neighbors, for fear they belonged to the enemy.

Once together they represented fully one-half of the citizens of Tenderfoot, and were indeed a formidable body, armed to the teeth as they were.

They watched the train to the northeast and conversed in low tones.

Having their attention in this direction they failed to notice the almost silent approach of a body of mounted men whose animals' hoofs were muffled, from the direction of Tenderfoot.

The riders were quite near before they were heard and challenged:

"Who's thar?" accompanied by the click, click of a weapon.

"Captain Sure Shot and his Pards," was the reply. "Are you friends or foes?"

An instant's pause, as if in deliberation, and then the Tenderfoot man answered:

"Friends."

The ten horsemen rode up to within a few feet of the fearless mountain men. Captain Sure Shot, who had been recognized by his voice, was in the van. They were darkly habited, as usual, and rode spirited dark horses.

"You are the honest men of the Nugget country, I presume," said the Champion Regulator, "here in answer to the notice Lieutenant Dodge pasted to the door of the Pickpocket at an early hour this morning. I am glad to see so many here. You will lose nothing by coming. All of you read the notice?"

"Read it er heard it read, cap'n," was the reply of the former speaker.

"Isn't this Rough Rube?" asked the captain, as he bent forward toward the tall mountaineer, who stood slightly in advance of his comrades.

"Yas, that's me."

The Regulator extended his hand, which was grasped by the other.

"We hate the same man, I know; that makes us friends," said Captain Sure Shot. "Well, what did you think of the notice?"

"We took it ter be ther straight thing, but we should like ter know ov course, ther particulars ov ther game afore we take a hand. War all yer said in thet ther truth?"

"Every word of it."

"Mountain George said thet it war a lie an' a put-up job on ther camp."

"That makes no difference; it's the truth,

just the same, if he does say it," said Captain Sure Shot. "If you were in the Pickpocket night before last you know it was the truth. The town was called Tenderfoot because it was founded by a tenderfoot. How did he receive my communication?"

"He pinned it in position with a twelve-inch bowie an' a very mad oath."

"That means defiance."

"An' he's got together his forces—ther toughs he kin depend on ter fight at his back an' sw'ars thar'll be a buzzards' feast ef ther Sure Shot Pards come in pistol range ov ther camp."

"The Sure Shot Pards have been in Tenderfoot to-night, and there was no buzzards' feast; unless it might be the carcass of an infernal spy whom we found on the outskirts, and whom we knew as Wildcat in the Silver Range. We were there looking over the battle-ground."

There was some wonderment among the Tenderfoot roughs at the boldness of these men.

"Wildcat was one of the Marked Thirteen," Captain Dan went on. "He's No. 1 of our vengeance. The Sure Shot Pards will be a terror to their foes hereafter."

"We've heerd ov ther Masked Regulators," said Rough Rube, "through a man who struck ther camp yesterday, an' who can't talk enough when full ov red-eye. His name is Brazen Bill. Puttin' ever'thing tergether that we hev heerd in ther last few days, we bev come ter ther conclusion that things are about ez yer say; eh, boys?"

There was an assenting murmur.

"Only we didn't quite understand that bit ov yer information about ther killin' ov ther feller who diskivered Tenderfoot. We've thought all ther time that Mountain George founded ther place. He hev always said that, an' we hed no reason ter disbelieve him."

"Well, it's a lie. The town was discovered by a young prospector, a tenderfoot, whose claim, I am satisfied, took in the richest ground of the place. He had no more than erected his shanty and got out a few pounds of dust, when Mountain George and a dozen others rode up and stretched him to a tree in the most brutal manner. Then they took possession and have grown rich off of you fellows. That's the true story. The young man's father and sister have the rights of his claim after his death, and the Sure Shot Pards have undertaken to secure them. Now, to all of you who faithfully assist us, I have the authority to promise you that you will lose nothing. The mines will be developed and you will be given work at good wages. We will make a respectable and decent town out of Tenderfoot, with no such characters as Mountain George, Bowie Joe and others in it. What do you say?"

The citizens of the mountain town expressed their satisfaction.

"That suits us," said Rough Rube. "We're tired ov livin' under ther rule ov such a man ez Mountain George, an' I reckon it'd be a picnic fer us ter see 'im git his deserts. Ther crack ov ther six-shooter or ther yell ov some drunken devil hev seldom ceased ter ring in our ears. Ther's a healthy graveyard down in ther valley, an', strange ter say, not one ov ther dead thar is ov Mountain George's stamp; nearly every poor sinner that we buried thar war a good an' honest citizen, passed in his life-checks by mixin' too freely with men only too eager ter settle a dispute by gettin' ther drop. Then thar's not a man among us, I reckon, who hasn't lost a good part ov his earnin's in ther Pickpocket. Don't we know that it's a skin game run thar by Mountain George? We diskivered it some time ago, but it proved death ter mention it, ez Sober Sam an' others could testify ef they war resurrected."

"This hev been ther state ov affairs in Tenderfoot. We hev never hed any flush times, an' we hev never seen a female in ther camp. We might hev shook ther place, but gold seemed purty plenty, which warn't the case ever'whar, an' we hev been stayin' along, anyhow till we heard ov a new find."

"Yer might put ther case ter vote, Captain Sure Shot. Ef ther rest ov ther boys think ye'r right an' hev my opinion they'll vote ter join yer. But ef they think yer story a fraud, an' want ter go back ter Mountain George, they'll go against it. Put it ter vote!"

"Put it ter vote!" repeated several, and the captain said:

"Those of you who will join the Sure Shot Pards in bringing Mountain George and his desperado associates to justice, and in restoring the Tenderfoot claim to its proper owners, raise your hands."

Every right hand in the party went up.

"That looks like bizness," said Rough Rube.

"Good!" exclaimed Captain Sure Shot. "Now raise your six-shooters and swear."

Again two-score right hands went up, this time with heavy revolvers in their clasp.

"We sw'ar!" was uttered in deep tones.

"That means through fire an' smoke," Rough Rube remarked. "We hain't no angels, we hain't, but we've got some ideas about right an' wrong. This means reform in Tenderfoot—and war. It means 'nihilation ter Mountain George. It means revenge fer Sober Sam, Poker Ike, an' others who died with ther hoots on. You kin count on us, Captain Sure Shot. I've looked inter ther face ov every pard hyer, an' I know 'em ter be ther straight ticket. Jest give us yer orders."

Captain Dan did not reply for a moment. He hesitated, as if forming some plan in his mind.

He and the Pards at his back still sat erect in their saddles, but a few feet intervening between them and the rough men who were their newly-formed allies.

The moon was slowly climbing up in the heavens, and its rays lent a wildly picturesque aspect to the scene.

Not far distant, so near that the grotesque shadows cast by the crowd fell upon him, a man lay outstretched, noting all that was taking place. No need to tell you who he was. That he was a spy of Mountain George you guess at once, and guess aright. It was Bowie Joe, a man about as desperate as Mountain George himself.

The Champion Regulator paused only a moment, and then said:

"Go back to Tenderfoot for the present. Ycu may be called to-night, and you may not. The call will be a peculiar whistle, and it means prepare to shoot. Let everything be quiet until the proper time comes. Then we'll let ther blows of vengeance fall."

"Thar'll be wild times in ther Sodom ov ther Southwest," said Rough Rube. "Many an old grudge'll hev a settlement. We'll listen fer ther whistle, cap'n, an' be ready ter shoot at ther nex' minnit. Ain't ther right, pards?"

There was a subdued exclamation that meant "yes" from the rough but honest mountaineers.

"Well, that's all," said the Champion Regulator, as he started his horse forward, followed by his men. "We understand each other now; and the marked men of Tenderfoot will understand us soon, and it will be a very unpleasant understanding."

The men stood back on the trail to allow the horsemen to pass. Captain Sure Shot waved his hand to Rough Rube, and the muffled steeds moved away over the trail.

"Wal, we go back ter Mountain George's stronghold," said Rough Rube. "We sneaked up hyer one by one, not sure whether another pard war comin' er not, but we'll go back shoulder ter shoulder. For'ard, march!"

And the bronzed and stalwart fellows descended the mountain trail, and fearlessly re-entered the town they had sworn to help clear of its ruling spirit and nearly two-score of his associates.

Bowie-Knife Joe, the spy, was not far in their rear.

CHAPTER IX.

DEADLY WORK.

ABOUT the time the strange oath was being taken in the mountains, Brazen Bill was passing a cabin in the southern outskirts of Tenderfoot on his way toward the Pickpocket, when he came upon a dark form outstretched upon the ground.

The giant bent over it in surprise, and on close inspection of the features, aided by the light of the moon, he discovered that it was the body of Wildcat, who had been stationed there as guard.

What at first escaped his eyes, but what a little later he saw, was a small piece of paper pinned to the breast of the dead man, bearing some handwriting.

Brazen Bill could not account for the mysterious death of this man, whom he had seen leave the Pickpocket in this direction not long before.

The chance discovery was a rather startling one to the giant, and for a little time he was perplexed what to do.

There was not the least spark of life in the body, he knew that. Already it was stark and cold, and he could see the deep wound, which had proved fatal, in the breast.

After a moment's cogitation Brazen Bill gathered up the body in his muscular arms and strode with it toward the Pickpocket.

He was possessed of more than ordinary strength, and his burden caused him but little exertion.

Arriving at the door of the notorious resort he went straight into the room and deposited his lifeless pard on one of the rough deal tables.

Instantly a crowd gathered around and there were exclamations of angry amazement when the face and form were recognized.

"Who done it?" was asked with curses.

"That's more'n I'm ready ter state," was Brazen Bill's reply. "I run onter ther body near some pard's cabin down hyer, an' it war lyin' jest ez it is now."

Then the paper pinned to the breast was sighted, and it was snatched up and held to the light.

Three words were written upon it, in the same hand which had written the notice still adorning the door, with its answer, a twelve-inch bowie, striking through the center.

The words were, "The Sure Shot Pards."

Mountain George gave vent to his feelings in several mad oaths.

"That answers ther question," he grated. "They hev opened ther ball by ringin' in a cold deck on Wildcat. By Jerusalem! thar'll be vengeance fer this!"

His words were echoed by the crowd.

"It hain't been long sence he left hyer," said one.

"No, an' ther devils must 'a' been hyer in ther camp an' supprised Wildcat on guard. It war a Satan's trick!"

"War it is!" exclaimed Brazen Bill. "By ther ghoul's o' Tophet! Ther next time they come they'll git ther deadliest reception ever given, er I'm no gent ov blue blood!"

"We've sworn ter stand by ther old camp an' each other. Nearly forty ov us hev taken ther oath, an' we're worse ner mountain lions! Won't certain ov our foes feel ther terrible claws? What ef forty traitors an' sneaks hev shook ther dust ov ther camp from ther feet an' stolen up ther mountain ter meet Cap'n Sure Shot? It means death ter them!"

"Wildcat—shell we bury 'im now?"

"Yes; two er three ov you fellers carry 'im down ther valley an' put some sod over 'im."

The body was gathered up and carried back into the moonlight and down to the little graveyard not far distant, where, with the assistance of a shovel, a shallow grave was dug and Wildcat laid away, with muttered oaths of vengeance.

Then the sod was replaced and the trio of grave-diggers returned to the Pickpocket.

A few minutes later Bowie-Knife Joe entered the place.

"Back, eh?" said Mountain George, who was perched on a seat behind the bar, indulging in frequent potations of such liquor as his place afforded. "What did yer see an' hear on ther trail?"

"Gimme a good pull at a bottle first," was the response, as the bar was reached.

A bottle was given him, and while the crowd gathered around, he invigorated himself with an ample supply.

"What did I see an' hear?" said Bowie Joe, as he set the bottle down with a satisfied air.

"Wal, ther first thing after I got a position whar I could diskiver things without bein' seen, I saw ther dozen kiotes o' Tenderfoot who war thar ahead ov me. They kept a-increasin' as ther fellers would sneak up, ez if they war goin' ter rob a hen-roost. More an' more come, until, by a rough count, thar war about two-score. Rough Rube war ther pertickerler gamecock cv ther occasion. Yer should hev seen ther pious gophers ez they stood thar a-cussin' Mountain George an' his ways, an' at ther same time keepin' ther droppers half drawn ez if afraid ever' minit ther same Mountain George would pounce down on 'em fer turnin' ther backs on ther camp."

"Didn't ther Sure Shot Pards show up?"

"Yas, a little later. They come from Tenderfoot, an' I heard ther cap'n say he hed laid out a 'tarnal spy. Did yer find Wildcat?"

"Brazen Bill found him," replied Mountain George. "He war cold an' stiff. We swore ter hev vengeance!"

"Vengeance we'll hev!" grated Bowie Joe.

"Pore Wildcat! we hed been pards fer five year. Whar is he?—I'd like ter see him."

"He's been put under ground."

"All right, ef it war decent, boys. Wildcat war squar' when he war alive an' he's got ter hev a straight deal now he's dead. Cap'n Sure Shot said he war No. 1 ov his vengeance. We'll try an' see ef he ain't ther only one. I come near shootin' ther mean kiote ez he set on his boss an' told ov layin' out Wildcat. But I knew they

would ketch me afore I could git away, an' so postponed ther job till ther next time I could git my peepers on 'im."

"They crawled inter ther town like thieves, an' we didn't know they war hyer, er ther would hev been ther promised buzzard feast."

"Ther hosses war muffled, Mountain. Then yer krow ther old tricks ov ther Silver Range. Cap'n Sure Shot went on ter say about his story like thet on ther paper thar, an' called 'em ther 'honest men ov Tenderfut.' Ther hull scheme is ter run us out ov ther camp an' take possession themselves. Thet's ther head an' tail ov ther bizness, cap'n. Masked Dan wants ter repeat ther old game, but we've run ther last time."

"Rough Rube shot off his mouth about ther camp an' Mountain George, an' ther end ov it all war thet ther hull crowd swore ter help ther Sure Shot Pards in wipin' us out. Then, headed by Rough Rube, they marched down ther trail inter ther town ez if it belonged ter them. They're hyer now, waitin' fer ther whistle thet means ter shoot."

"They seem ter forget thet we hev ther deadliest six-shooters in ther Territory!" exclaimed Mountain George. "Thar's death fer traitors!"

"Whard ther Sure Shot Pards go ter?" asked Whisky Jack. "They didn't come back ter camp?"

"No; they went to'ard whar Brazen Bill says ther camp is. Thar war ten ov 'em, ther same crowd thet hunted down ther Bowlder Band, only they didn't hev on no masks."

"They didn't set no time ter charge on ther town?"

"No."

"Yer say thar war about forty at Rough Rube's back?"

"Thet's about it."

"Then thar's fifty ov 'em—ag'in' us forty," remarked Mountain George. "Fifty wolves ag'in' forty tigers. We'll see who comes out ahead in ther fight fer Tenderfut. I reckon—Thar's a hoss!"

The Pickpocket roughs started at the sound of approaching hoofs, and their bronze hands sought the ready revolvers.

It was a time when every sound was suspicious of danger to them.

In a moment they became aware that there was but one animal, approaching from the northeast.

Mountain George left the bar and sprung to the door, followed by the others.

The horse was coming on at a rapid pace. It was soon near enough for those in the doorway to recognize its rider as Brazos Pete.

Brazos Pete did not hold the reins, but was clinging to the saddle with an air of desperation. He reeled from side to side with the motion of the horse, and it seemed that it was only by the greatest effort that he kept his seat.

The animal was slackening its speed, as it was nearing home, and when it came up Mountain George grasped the bits and brought it to a standstill.

Brazos Pete, wild-eyed and bloody, fell over into the arms of his pards.

They uttered mad oaths when they saw his condition, saw that he was desperately wounded with a bullet in his breast.

Leaving the horse to go its way, they carried him tenderly into the Pickpocket, and deposited him on the table where the body of Wildcat had rested shortly before.

Whisky was poured down his throat, and his shirt was torn open and the wound dressed the best the rough hands knew how.

It was some time before the wounded desperado could speak.

Finally he partially regained his strength, and was able to look intelligently into the eyes of his pards and answer their questions.

"How war it, Mountain? Well," he said, huskily, "I follered thet old sinner ter his den, ez yer told me. He never stopped er turned his head till he got in sight ov a cabin in Buzzard Gulch. Then it seemed he caught on some way thet he war bein' follered, and all at once thar war a flash a little ahead ov me an' I got this bullet hyer in ther breast. I managed ter keep my seat ez my hoss wheeled an' tore over ther back trail. Ther critter never checked up till he got hyer. Back yonder in ther mountains ten men war sittin' on ther hosses, five on each side ov ther trail. They must hev been ther Champion Regulators. They didn't say a word er move, but jest let my hoss come on. So hyer I am, Mountain, with a bullet in my life-box. I'm done traillin' fer a time."

Brazos Pete was done trailing for all time. Before the sun rose and set again he found a bed beside Wildcat.

CHAPTER X.

A ROUGH VISITOR.

A TYPICAL desperado of those wild days and of that wild region was Mountain George. Possessed of natural intelligence above the usual of his kind, he combined with it a love of lawlessness and evil-doing that was as deep-rooted as his soul. He was troubled with no conscientious scruples, and he was never so much in his element as when the leading spirit of a number of characters whose desperateness was only overshadowed when compared to his own.

No sooner was the terrible Bowlder Band broken up, than here he was again, surrounded by men who were ready to obey his commands as long as they could lift a six-shooter.

While Mountain George was bold, even reckless, he had something of the cunning nature of an Indian, and would not hesitate to strike an enemy an underhand blow; especially when thereby it was a means of gratification to himself, by bringing into his possession something he coveted.

After hearing Brazos Pete's story his scheming brain was set to work, and he revolved over and over in his mind what he had heard.

He endeavored to learn more of the particulars from the wounded trailer, but he was too near to death's door to answer intelligibly.

Soon after, Mountain George left the Pickpocket and entered a small cabin but a few steps away. He closed the door behind him and then struck a match, for the room was in darkness. The light revealed a rudely-furnished apartment, with a table in one corner on which sat a tallow dip.

This rude candle the rough proceeded to light. Then, from a well-concealed crevice in the floor, just beneath the table, he drew forth a small packet of letters and papers.

"Cap'n Sure Shot would probably like ter hev them," he muttered, as he held them up. "But ther Champion Regulator will never git 'em. They're fer nobody's eyes but mine."

He drew a stool which did service for a chair up to the light, and opened the packet before him on the table. The papers were simply tied together with a slender buckskin thong.

The first that was opened was the penciled boundaries of a claim, and the signature of John Wilkes was at the bottom.

"Thet's ther all-important dockymint," said the desperado, with a grim chuckle. "Cap'n Sure Shot's fingers would itch ter git hold ov it ef he knew ov its existence. It's ther claim thet takes in ther richest vein ov Tenderfut. But thet ain't what I'm interested in now."

He sorted the papers through his fingers as if in search of some particular one.

The remainder were nearly all letters, mostly written in a neat feminine hand, but a few were in the cramped hand of a man. One of the former, whose conclusion was exposed, read, "Your loving sister, Clara."

Mountain George did not stop to read them. He had done that before, and he was now searching for an envelope which contained something heavier than a sheet of note-paper.

It took in all but a moment to find it, and, inserting his fingers, the desperado drew forth a photograph of card size.

Before him was the likeness of a beautiful girl, perhaps eighteen years of age, with fair features and firm mouth and eyes, and long wavy hair. Beneath it, on the margin of the card, were written two words—"Sister Clara"—in the hand which had written the record of the claim and signed "John Wilkes" in the first paper.

The eyes of Mountain George glistened as he gazed at the face and form of the picture before him.

"Thar's ther beauty fer me," he exclaimed in admiration. "She's prettier than a hundred diamonds! She's worth her weight in ther best nuggets in Arizona! P'd give my interest in kingdom come ter find ther original of thet picture. Let me see—let's think ov a few things ag'in. Cap'n Sure Shot says Tenderfut belongs ter ther father an' sister of ther galoot we found hyer six months ago, an' thet he's lookin' arter thet claim. These letters hyer are from ther same old man and his purty Clara, sent ter Tucson. We hed a visitor ter-night, an old man, an' Brazos Pete says thar's a cabin in Buzzard Gulch. What's ter hinder ther old man bein' father Wilkes? An' Clara, ther Texas flower—ain't she with her dad? Thet cabin warn't thar a while back. Ain't it nateral thet Cap'n Sure Shot would bring ther two hyer, set up thet shanty fer 'em, an' then go ter work ter run us out? By Jerusalem! ther thing's worth investigatin'."

He left the pictures and papers on the table,

and walked up and down the apartment as a man laboring under excitement.

"What ef ther beauty's hyer—in reach?" he continued, suddenly, all his thoughts on the new and absorbing subject.

The bare possibility of her being in the Nugget country made him confident that it was the case.

"Ten ter one she's mine ef she's hyer. Thar's one way ter find out—go ter Buzzard Gulch. An' thar's whar I'm goin'! Ef I could captur' her, it'd be ther worst blow I could give ter my foes!"

Just then he stopped in his tracks as if struck by a bullet. There was a footstep on the outside, and then came a loud rap at the door, as if from the butt of a revolver.

Angered by the interruption, Mountain George sprung to the door, his hand involuntarily dropping on a weapon.

For the moment he had forgotten the picture and the papers on the table by the candle.

With an oath he drew back the door, and then his weapon was jerked from his belt. But although Mountain George was quick, he was not quick enough.

He was pounced upon by a man in every sense as much of an athlete as himself—a man with long black hair and glittering eyes, and clad in the rich dress of a sport!

The desperado of the camp was not prepared for the assault, and he was handled with a grip of steel.

Ere scarce a thought, except the instant recognition of the intruder, could rush through his brain, the terrible grasp on his throat was relaxed and he was hurled headlong across the room into a corner.

He had hardly touched the floor, in a half-dazed condition, when those vise-like hands again assailed him and a knee was planted on his chest.

He was totally at the mercy of the Champion Regulator.

"I sometimes come back when unexpected!" exclaimed the captain. "I want to warn you against Buzzard Gulch. Don't you see what Brazos Pete got? Steer clear of the place if you don't want to be turned into carrion!"

The fierce words brought the disconcerted desperado to his senses. But he was so pinned to the floor that he could not even struggle.

"The walls have ears and eyes, Mountain, don't forget that!" Captain Sure Shot went on. "So when you discuss yer plans and look over papers, don't do it in the light of a candle where the walls can hear and see! Again let me tell you, there's death at Buzzard Gulch, the instant you strike the place. You must stay in Tenderfoot and fight awhile before your final moment comes. And this is a last warning; I've given it in a way you'll understand and remember!"

The big rough felt his weapons being drawn from his belt, and the revolver he still held was jerked from his hand. Then the knee was removed and he was free to get up.

He sprung to his feet as the Champion Regulator backed across the room, and depositing the weapons on the table, coolly picked up the picture and the papers in their stead, and placed them in his pocket.

Mountain George uttered a mad oath and made a move forward. But he drew back when he found himself looking into the muzzle of a frowning six-shooter.

"Never mind, Mountain, I'll take 'em," said the Indian-eyed sport. "The record of the claim that 'takes in the richest vein of Tenderfoot' is exactly what I want. My fingers have really itched to get hold of it. I'll take the picture and the letters also. They're what you found in this room, when John Wilkes was taken from it and hung. Yes, this is the identical cabin, I feel cert'in. You'll get pay for it all, Mountain George; the Sure Shot Pards have sworn it!"

He spoke almost softly, but his midnight eyes glowed like coals. Their look cowed Mountain George more than the revolver, which, nevertheless, he knew to be deadly.

He stood in his tracks without a word but with clinched teeth as his old foe backed toward the door, and finally stood for a moment on the threshold.

"Remember the warning to keep your distance from Buzzard Gulch and the cabin Brazos Pete told you of! I'll visit you again soon."

A bow and a provoking cool smile accompanied his last words, and Captain Sure Shot stepped out into the moonlight.

Mountain George bounded across the room to the table, seized a revolver, and the next mo

ment was on the outside of the cabin gazing in every direction for his late visitor.

But he was nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER XI.

STARTLING EVENTS.

THE big desperado boiled with rage at the rough handling he had received and the loss of the important packet of papers:

At that moment, with his revolver cocked and ready, it was his purpose to "shoot on sight"—to perforate his foe the moment he was seen.

But the long-haired captain had left as suddenly as he had appeared to Mountain George.

Failing to see him in any direction, the mad rough bounded toward the Pickpocket, and a huge spring took him into the middle of the room.

"Draw yer droppers an' seour ther camp!" he exclaimed to his pards. "Cap'n Sure Shot is hyer, an' likely his hull gang! Shoot on sight! Down ever' black devil yer see!"

He leaped back out the door, and his bronzed associates followed him, their hands gripping their ready six-shooters and threatening oaths issuing from their lips.

With searching eyes they started away in every direction, each man bent on obeying the mandates to the letter.

The Pickpocket for the moment was deserted. Even the barkeeper, Slow Sandy, had left his post and was standing in front of the rough building with a weapon in his hand.

Suddenly he felt a pair of heavy hands on his shoulders, and the next instant he found himself at full length on the ground with a pair of glittering eyes above his face.

Then he received a blow on the head from the butt of a revolver that made him unconscious for several minutes.

He was not aware that half a score of dark and active men had entered the room that he had just left, and that a bold deed was being performed therein. During the brief interval that elapsed before the return of his senses the Pickpocket was the scene of a wild and tragic event.

Only a moment was absorbed in its execution, and then the men vacated the place and disappeared silently and quickly.

Wild times were those in Tenderfoot.

Later, when Slow Sandy came back to consciousness, he staggered to his feet, his brain still confused from the blow he had received.

He entered the door of the saloon, and then his face grew white, his eyes bulged out and a yell of terror burst from his throat.

Suspended from one of the high cross-beams of the cabin, by a noose that encircled his neck, was Whisky Jack!

He was black in the face and dead, with a paper on his breast bearing the word "Vengeance" in large letters.

On the table, with his glassy eyes staring upward, was Brazos Pete. His trip to Blizzard Gulch had cost him his life.

The scene was too much for the nerves of the affrighted barkeeper, and bounding from the cabin he gave a few lusty yells, which soon had the desired effect.

A dozen men came running back to the place.

Slow Sandy pointed toward the door, and the mountain roughs were soon across the threshold.

They beheld the spectacle that was there presented with exclamations of amazement and fury. In the few minutes of their absence, scouring the outskirts of the camp, those whom they were hunting had entered their very stronghold and performed this deed of vengeance and defiance.

Terrible in their nature were the results of the visits of the Sure Shot Pards.

Mountain George raised his revolver, and a flash and a report succeeded the movement. The rope with which Whisky Jack was suspended parted in twain, cut by the bullet, and the body fell to the floor, from which it was taken up and placed by the side of Brazos Pete.

Many more had returned to the spot by this time, attracted by the yells and the shot. They all reported non-success in their search for Captain Sure Shot and his Pards. That they were in the camp this deadly work evidenced, but they had been discovered by no one.

Another and a more systematic search was conducted by Mountain George, with a like result. And the two-score of stalwart roughs who had tramped all over the camp with cocked weapons and dark threats were compelled to return to their notorious resort empty-handed and defeated.

Meanwhile, one character was not troubling

himself with the affairs of the camp, but was leaving it and the wild deeds being enacted in its confines far to his rear.

The giant who bestrode a clean-limbed horse, which was going eastward at a leisurely gait over the grama grass of Nugget Valley, was Brazen Bill.

Where was he going? Hear his own words as he urges his animal onward:

"Bowie Joe hezz told me thet ther Tucson trail leads through Buzzard Gulch. Whar is ther Tucson trail? It seems ter me, by ther great hiyankidanks, thet when I war takin' that 'tarnal ride over ther trail ter Tenderhuf I come ter a place whar ther trail forked. My hoss went ter ther right. Why can't ther left way be ther Tucson trail? Jest at present, daug my blue blood, I want ter git ter Buzzard Gulch. I bain't acquainted much with this kentry, but I'll git thar ef I kin find ther trail. Thar's a cabin thar thet didn't use ter be thar, Brazos Pete says, an' Cap'n Sure Shot writes me thet he is winnin' a claim fer a dad and a darter. I kinder think it war ther dad thet paid his respects ter Tenderhuf; also ter Brazos. Now ef thet's ther dad, whar's ther darter? Mebbe she's at ther cabin in Buzzard Gulch."

Strange to say, the same thought which had occurred to Mountain George had developed in the usually thick and whisky-muddled brain of Brazen Bill.

These two were probably the only ones who had suspected the truth. Mountain George had stated his determination to go to Buzzard Gulch and inspect the cabin and its inmates, but had been prevented by an unexpected visit. Brazen Bill had resolved on the same thing, and stealing out of the camp at what was perhaps a remarkably opportune time for him, he was now fairly on his way in search of the supposed female at Buzzard Gulch.

"Mebbe I'm wrong, mebbe I'm right," continued the desperado. "But ther cyclone ov ther Silver Range never misses a guess! I'm a-thinkin' thar's a bird ov paradise at Buzzard Gulch. It's good-day, Mounting George, ef I git her. She'll be worth more than ther hull Nugget kentry. Thaings are gittin' warm in Tenderfut jest now, an'—wal, thar's Tucson. Me an' ther Nugget rose could quietly pass on ter Tucson, an' leave Tenderfut an' Sure Shot ter kill each other ez they please."

The giant was a desperado as evil as Mountain George him elf, and had in his nature the same traitorous instincts of the savage. He had sold himself to Mountain George, but at the thought of being able to make such a capture as a girl he had turned his back on the chief desperado.

If he should discover such a prize he was the one to make the most of it, even at the expense of Mountain George. The quality of allegiance he did not possess.

The moon was well up and the stars shone brilliantly, so that the night was fairly light.

The giant urged his horse on over the valley for a considerable time before he came to the forking of the trail.

He kept to the right—which was in leed the Tucson trail and which led through Buzzard Gulch.

Persisting in his course for an hour, he reached the entrance to the gulch, which was lonely looking enough.

He allowed his horse to continue in a walk while he kept close watch ahead of him for the cabin.

He saw where the gulch branched, but he kept on in the main way until he became convinced that he was wrong, and then turning back he took the right direction, and soon beheld the little log house.

One of the front windows was dark, but through the curtain of the other a faint light was visible, showing that the occupant or occupants were still awake.

The question now was to find whether or not the girl was an inmate of the cabin.

Just how to do this was a poser to the big Arizonian, but finally a bold plan struck him as being feasible.

He secured his horse in the shadows of the gulch, and himself keeping well in the dark, he advanced toward the house.

When within a hundred feet of the door, he picked up a rock the size of a goose-egg and hurled it with all his strength at the house.

True to its aim, it struck the door with a resounding thwack, sending a shiver over the whole building.

A moment later the blow was repeated with an even larger rock.

If boldness would accomplish his purpose, Brazen Bill was sure to succeed.

"Thet'll stir 'em up inside, er I'm no laughin' rose ov Kilkenny!" he chuckled. "Ther old man will rush out with a big sixer ter see what's ther matter. Ef he only will!"

The desperado drew his huge revolver and waited in silence.

Several moments passed and no one appeared at the door.

"Why don't ther old skunk come out?" muttered the waiting rough. "Ther minit he does, I'll hev vengeance fer Brazos Pete. I'll c'lar this b'utiful territory ov one pestiferous old sinner. I reckon I'll hev ter stir him out, ef I do nothin' else ter-night."

Another heavy rock was projected against the door with all the force of the giant's arm.

But it had scarcely struck when there was a flash and a report, and a bullet whistled startlingly close to his head. The old man of the cabin was not the fool to expose himself to a night attack!

The shot had been sent from a loophole near the dark window.

Surprised that he had been seen in the dark shadows of the cliff and that his plan to draw the old man from the cabin had so signally failed, Brazen Bill was at a loss for an instant how to act.

But suddenly a *ruse* flashed through his mind that promised success. He threw up his hands and fell to the ground.

If it was not too dark for the keen eyes in the cabin to see him throw the rock it was not too dark for them to witness this last act.

The *ruse* was successful. The door opened and James Wilkes came out, with a revolver in his right hand.

He started toward the prostrate form of the giant, but at that moment the latter suddenly sat up, and leveling his weapon, pulled the trigger!

It was a dastardly shot, and James Wilkes staggered and fell at the door of his cabin!

CHAPTER XII.

A BRAVE GIRL.

THERE was no shamming on the part of the old man. The bullet from the assassin's weapon had hit the mark intended.

The desperado went forward with an oath of satisfaction.

"Now fer ther mountain beauty!" he exclaimed. "Oh, ef she's only hyer!"

He quickly covered the distance to the cabin, passing without notice the outstretched body of the cabin's owner.

Eagerly pushing open the door with one hand while he held his revolver in readiness with the other, he saw that the room was in darkness; but at the moment of his entrance the door connecting the two rooms of the cabin was opened, admitting a stream of light. And there in the doorway stood such a vision of loveliness that Brazen Bill was dumb with admiration and delight.

"Who was it, father?" asked the girl, apprehensively, mistaking the dark form of the rough for her father.

"Brazen Bill ov Tenderfut!" exclaimed the desperado, as he strode toward the girl. "I'm a gent with genuine blue blood!"

She gave an exclamation of fear and started back. She attempted to shut the door and exclude the unwelcome guest, but he was too quick for her—his huge hand caught it ere it could close and she was shoved backward as if she were an infant.

Clara shrunk into an opposite corner of the room as the burly ruffian came in and coolly seated himself on a chair.

He was completely lost in bold admiration.

"Ye'r purtier than all ther diamonds in ther universe!" he broke out. "Ther fairest flower thet ever blossomed in old Arizone! Oh, me noble heart, I am ready ter whoop with delight. I hev found an angel, dropped from ther skies—in fact, a lovely bird ov paradise, er I'm no poet!"

The rough paused, but did not for a moment remove his eyes from the fair being he had discovered in Buzzard Gulch.

She advanced a step toward him with indignant eyes.

"What do you want here?" she said.

"You, me angel!" was the reply, "I want you, an' by ther great humpin' biyankidanks! I'm goin' ter hev yer. Thet's ile from ther can. I'm a ban'some knight known ez Sir Royal, an' I hev come ter rescue yer from this awful prison. I shell take yer ter tner most kind an' lovin' frien's."

The giant's face spread into a would-be engaging grin, but the girl did not fail to see the demon in his eyes.

"You will leave this moment, sir," she said, "or my father will make you repent it."
 "No, hardly, me daisy," chuckled the mountain rough. "Yer dad won't do that. Didn't yer hear two shots?"

"Two shots? They were his."

"Only one war—ther other war mine. Yer dad took a fast trail ter Tartarus!"

The startled girl studied him a moment in fear and doubt. And then the truth flashed upon her and her face grew white.

"You villain!" she uttered, through clinched teeth—"you villain! Go this instant! How dare you come into this cabin?"

Summoning all her energy, she drew herself erect and spoke in a commanding voice.

"I hev come fer you," was the complacent response. "Yer will hev ter go with me. I'm a gent ov blue blood, I am. I want yer ter cheer my lonely hours. Yer will come, me darlin'?"

"No, never, you brute!" and again she stepped toward him, her eyes blazing. "Back to your den, you coward! You murderer! You will pay for this night's work! If you have killed my father, Captain Sure Shot will terribly avenge the deed."

"We'll not speak ter ther cap'n about it. You've heard that ignorance is bliss, so we'll let ther Champion Regulator enjoy a big dose ov bliss. By Tophet! he'll never know it, I reckon. I don't perpose ter pay 'im a visit, er even go in his direction. I've got different plans, me daisy. We'll give ther nugget kentry ther shake altogether; we'll quietly take ther trail ter Tucson, almost due east, an' directly away from yer loved Cap'n Sure Shot. We kin reach Tucson by mornin', mebbe afore. What's ther gold ov Tenderfoot when yer kin hev a fine home in Tucson? Ter Tucson we'll go!"

He arose and went toward the girl with outstretched arm.

She gave a slight cry of fear, and then exclaimed, resolutely:

"Back! Don't dare to touch me!"

He laughed mockingly.

"Touch yer—when yer mine! I must hev a sweet kiss from them rosy red lips ov yours!"

Clara, the Texas flower, was in danger. She was alone and unprotected, and Brazen Bill felt that he had her at his mercy.

But she would not tamely submit. During the years spent in the Southwest she had learned the use of weapons, and a small, silver-mounted revolver had long been one of her prized possessions.

She had instinctively retreated toward the shelf in the corner where it lay when the unwelcome guest first entered.

Now, as he advanced upon her with evil eyes, she snatched it from its position and presented it at his breast when he was scarcely an arm's length away.

Brazen Bill halted at her sharp command.

"As sure as I live I will shoot!" she warned, firmly. "Will you go?"

He only looked pleased.

"By ther ghouls ov Tophet!" he ejaculated, "yer git purtier an' purtier! Dang my blue blood, yer sweeter ner any dozen pictur's. It's yer look thet's got ther drop on me, my mountain flower, an' not thet toy; I don't care nothin' fer thet. Yer make sech a purty pictur' ez yer stand thar thet, by thunder! I'm head an' years in love with yer! Yer ther champion rose fer me. It was ther brightest thought ov me life thet brought me ter Buzzard Gulch ter-night. What would Mountain George give ter be hyer? Come, come, me Arizona prize—"

"Another step, demon of Tenderfoot, and I will pull the trigger!" cried the desperate girl. "This revolver is self-acting. Leave me alive or stay here dead. Never shall you touch me!"

An oath dropped from the bearded lips of the desperado. He was growing angry at her continued resistance.

"Oh, yer! a little tigress now, but I'll tame yer!" he sent through his teeth. "In Tucson yer'll be ez mild an' lovin' ez a lamb. Are yer goin' ter put down ther dropper?"

For answer Clara raised the silver-mounted weapon the fifth of an inch. Her face was white but firm, and her eyes told that she was ready to shoot in self-protection.

Brazen Bill glared at her a moment, angered at being held at bay, and then with a quick movement reached forward and roughly caught her arm. He attempted to wrench the revolver from her grasp, but the weapon was discharged and blinded by the powder and struck by the bullet, the ruffian reeled backward and fell heavily to the floor!

The brave girl had saved herself at the last moment.

She was too frightened at first to realize the

situation, but when the smoke cleared away and she saw that Brazen Bill had really been shot she drew a long breath of relief.

"If I have killed him it makes one villain less in Arizona," she said. "And perhaps avenged my poor father. I must find him."

She slipped into her pocket the weapon which had been of such good service to her, and hastening from the room, soon came upon the body of her father.

"Oh, father!" she cried, falling on her knees beside him, "are you dead? Speak to me!"

She looked into his face, ghastly and bloody, and sobbed convulsively.

Calming herself after a short time, she brought some water from the spring and tenderly washed his face and bathed the wound on his head.

She did not think he was dead. She thought his heart beat faintly.

"I must have aid—I cannot save him alone!" she murmured. "If I could only get him into the cabin to his bed I know I could nurse him back to life. If Dan were only here. He must come—he is needed here. I must ride to him and bring him!"

Truly the poor girl was in need of aid, with the body of a giant rough lying in her room, and her father, her only friend and protector within miles, dying on the hard ground of Buzzard Gulch.

Fully aware that the only way she could hope for assistance was by riding to the camp of Captain Sure Shot, she did not hesitate long ere proceeding to action.

First bringing from the house a soft cushion and placing it under her father's head, and placing a damp cloth on his wound, she made some hasty preparations with regard to her own person, knowing full well what a difficult journey she had before her.

She realized the dangers to be incurred in traversing alone the country of the Arizona desperados, but with her spirit of determination once aroused she was ready to undertake any venture to bring relief to her wounded father.

Some hundred yards up the gulch, on a fertile tract of ground, a couple of good horses were picketed—the animals her father and herself had ridden to the Nugget country in company with the Sure Shot Pards.

Making her way to the grazing-ground, the best of the steeds was soon caparisoned ready for the journey.

Two minutes later, brave Clara Wilkes was riding at a dangerous speed through the uncertain shadows of Buzzard Gulch, with a pale, hard-set face, that was never turned to the right nor to the left.

Ah, if the fair Texas flower had known what was before her!

CHAPTER XIII.

DEATH TO TRAITORS.

RAP! rap! rap!

"Come, wake up hyer, Bowie Joe! Wake up, I say! I've got ther purtiest prize in ther Rockies ter show yer."

"Dast it!" growled the voice of Bowie Joe inside the cabin; "wake a feller up jest ez he's struck a ten-inch vein ov ther yaller ore in dreamland! Who's thar?"

"Me—Mountain George. Come out, Bowie, an' I'll show yer somethin' ter make yer eyes sparkle. Better ner a ten-inch vein ov gold!"

A moment later the door of the cabin opened, and Bowie Joe made his appearance.

"Hello, Mountain! What's up? I thought yer an' ther bull camp long since asleep."

"Hevn't closed eye ter-night, Bowie. On ther contrary, I've made ther biggest strike ov ther century. What d'yer think I've got thar in my cabin?"

Bowie Joe expressed his total ignorance.

"A piece ov caliker, Bowie—a gal, by Jerusalem!"

The "second best man" looked his astonishment.

"It's ile from ther can, ez Brazen Bill would say," Mountain George went on enthusiastically.

"I war so happy over ther find I hed ter come an' tell yer. Tenderfoot holds ther trump card ter-night, you bet!"

"Give me ther particulars, Mountain," urged Bowie Joe. "Tartarus! I didn't know there war a gal in ther Nugget kentry. Ov course she's from Tucson! What's ther rest ov ther story?"

Mountain George began at the first and told him of the letters and picture found in the cabin of the young discoverer of Tenderfoot, and of the circumstances which had led him to conclude

that James Wilkes and his daughter, Clara Wilkes, were probably in the Nugget country. Of his determination to go to Buzzard Gulch to investigate and of Captain Sure Shot's visit which prevented his immediate departure.

"His warnin' not ter go near ther gulch made it plainer than ever ter me thet ther gal war thar. Ef ther darned galoot thought fer a minit thet I wouldn't go fer sech a prize jest because he said 'nay' he's a bigger fool than he used ter be."

"Some time arter ther boys hed left ther Pickpocket, arter swearin' vengeance over Brazos an' Wildcat, I tuk ter hoss an' made fur Buzzard Gulch. No matter ef I didn't take ther regulation trail, an' kep' ter ther south, I made Nugget Valley in comfort'ble time, an' was soon goin' direct ter ther beauty's abode."

"Wal, Bowie, shoot me fer a spring chicken ef I didn't meet ther gal face ter face on ther trail, she a-comin' west'ard like ther Old Boy hussel. Stop'er! You bet! She showed fight, an' by Jerusalem! I've got one lock ov hair less than I hed when I started from hyer. It war clipped slick an' clean by a bullet. But I disarmed ther little prickly pear, an' brought'er hyer. We come back ther same route I went, fer I warn't anxious ter meet ther Pards, an' she's in ther cabin over thar now. She's still got ther tiger in her eyes, but I'll tame'er, an' thet purty quick. I tell yer it war a ten-strike, Joe. Not only got ther gal but a good hoss! Tenderfoot hes got ther drop on ther Sure Shot Pards now!"

The two stood in the soft moonlight before Bowie-Knife Joe's cabin while he listened with eager interest to the recital.

"But what war she doin' in Nugget Valley?" he queried.

"Thet's more'n I know, unless she war comin' ter meet me!" laughed the boss desperado. "She wouldn't tell whar she war goin'."

"Yer say she's purty, Mountain?"

"Purty—wal, I should whistle—"

"Yer goin' ter keep'er hyer in ther camp, ov course?"

"Yas; she'll be Queen ov Tenderfoot."

"It seems ter me yer about right in sayin' we've got ther drop on ther Pards," asserted the man of the bowie. "It's ther worst blow we could deal Sure Shot Dan. We kin dictate terms an' make him come ter them by usin' ther gal. She's ther richest pay-dirt in ther territory."

"Thet's possible, but I've got another plan," replied Mountain George, thoughtfully. "We might bring Cap'n Sure Shot ter terms by threatenin' ther gal, an' then ag'in we mightn't; I fancy we'd hev a durned circus a-doin' it. I tell yer, Bowie Joe, thar's never goin' ter be peace fer ther Boulder Band while Masked Dan lives. Thar's not room in ther territory fer him an' me. We'll never be able ter git a good sleep till we've wiped him entirely out ov existence. Thet's ther reason I say we can't make bindin' terms with ther gal—the only terms I'll agree ter is death ter ther Sure Shot Pards! Ther gal will do ter make us fight—we could fight worse ner forty catamounts with her at stake!"

"Then what are yer plans?" was the question.

"Brazen Bill hes told us about ther camp ov ther Regulators; we know whar they hev ter travel ter come ter Tenderfoot, an' we know thet ez soon ez it's dark ter-morrow they'll make fer ther camp. Why can't we lay fer'em on ther trail, an' at one blow clean out ther varmints ov Satan? Twenty shots would empty every saddle, sure. We've got ter strike er we'll git struck. Thar's three ov ther Thirteen thet come ter Tenderfoot already gone. What d'yer think ov ther idee, Bowie Joe?"

"Wal, I say good, cap'n," was the response. "I war thinkin' ter-night thet ef we stay hyer always on ther defense we're goin' ter die like rats. We may swar ter hev vengeance, but by thunder! we've got ter act, an' in a way ter surprise our foes! Ef we do ez yer say I believe we're bound ter hev success. Be car'ful in gittin' in position an' ther thing's done—we kin drop every 'tarnal mother's son ov'em!"

For some time longer the two desperadoes conversed and laid plans at the door of the cabin, when Bowie Joe said suddenly:

"See hyer, cap'n, I want ter see thet prize—thet lily ov ther valley. Ef I'm not mistaken yer promised it, an' I'm gittin' impatient."

"All right," replied Mountain George with a laugh. "Yer shall see ther Rocky Mountain belle—the Queen ov Tenderfoot. I hev no desire ter go back on my promise. Come on hyer with me."

Side by side the two went toward the first cabin ever erected in the town.

Within Mountain George's dwelling a light

burned dimly, and Clara, the Texas flower, was held a prisoner.

The fair girl reclined upon the rough couch, and her eyes were damp and her cheeks tear-stained.

She arose when sounds at the door indicated that some one was about to enter.

"Can it be a friend?" she murmured—"no, it cannot be—I have no friends here."

Still with a faint hope she watched for the appearance of the visitor.

"Found again, by Tophet!" were the first words that fell on her ear. They were immediately followed through the doorway by the burly figure of a giant rough who had dark spots of blood on his shirt and a large handkerchief tied around his head.

Brazen Bill!

"Left me in Buzzard Gulch cabin, eh?" he said with a malicious grin. "My blossom, come! I'm on hand a ag'in, an' that's no time fer words. We'll go ter Tucson yet!"

He went toward her and she shrunk from him.

"Come; no foolin' this time. Yer little rascal, yer cheated me once ter-night, an' but fer bevin' genuine blue blood I wouldn't be here now. I staggered out ov the cabin jest ez you went flyin' down the gulch. I follered ez quick ez possible, an' saw yer meetin' with Mountain George. So we all come ter Tenderfoot. By Tophet, girl! yer mine now fer sure. It's good-by Mounting (George an' Tenderfoot. I've got my boss waitin' an' we go ter Tucson ez fast ez he kin travel. Come!"

The desperado unceremoniously seized the resisting girl in his arms, clapping his hand over her mouth just in time to prevent a scream. She was but a baby in his grasp, and her struggles were of no consequence.

He bore her in triumph to the door.

"Tucson—Tucson it is!" escaped his lips. "When Mounting comes ther cage will be empty. I'm a playin' a big game an' I'll eucher the Nugget pards ter-night!"

Brazen Bill falsified. He was not ten paces from the door when two stalwart men loomed up directly in his path, and the voice of Mountain George rung out madly.

"Drop'er, yer sneakin' kiote! By heavens! yer've sealed yer doom! Drop ther Nugget prize, Brazen Bill!"

Brazen Bill did not lose his head. He continued right on, holding the girl before him, so that, although the two roughs who barred his path extended glistening weapons, they dare not shoot for fear of injuring the girl.

The giant also managed to whip out his revolver with one hand and hold it in a menacing manner.

His coolness and strength were wonderful.

"I drop nothin'!" he flashed to his old pards. "Move ter ther left, you two, er I'll bore yer with bullets. By Tophet! I mean it, Mounting! I'll shoot ef yer don't stand aside. I hold ther winnin' cards jest now, an' I mean ter sweep clean ther boards!"

With a grating oath the king-pin of the camp and his pard hesitatingly stepped to one side, and Brazen Bill walked past, keeping his burden and his revolver in the position in which they did the most good.

Finally he was backing away from them, and like chained lions, the Tenderfoot pards glared at him.

"I'm never comin' back, Mounting!" was the giant's parting shot. "Me an' ther Arizona flower are goin' away. Far'well!"

All at once Mountain George and Bowie Joe parted company, so suddenly that for an instant Brazen Bill was nonplused. The two dodged in different directions and were out of sight in a twinkling.

The giant was alarmed, and replacing his weapon in his belt, ran with all his speed along the trail which formed the one street of Tenderfoot.

Presently he came to a horse, and with a rude warning to the girl to maintain silence, he placed her upon the animal and quickly unloosed the hitch-strap.

He made a mistake in thinking the girl would calmly wait for him to mount behind her and carry her far beyond the possible reach of friends. Clara Wilkes was made of different metal.

No sooner had the giant released his hold of her than she sprang from the horse on the opposite side from her enemy and ran for her life.

Brazen Bill gave vent to a thunderous oath.

It was the last utterance of his life.

"Death ter traitors!" suddenly rung out on the night-air in Mountain George's coarse, mad tones.

The words were immediately followed by a shot, and Brazen Bill sunk to the ground under his horse's feet.

Clara was fleeing—whither? Anywhere to escape from her dread captors.

The lamb was loose in the wolves' den!

She heard rapid, heavy steps behind her, and just as she would have fallen, two dark, rough arms were thrown around her, and she was lifted from her feet.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN NUGGET VALLEY.

CAPTAIN SURE SHOT, the Champion Regulator of Arizona, bent over a rude but comfortable bed on which lay James Wilkes.

He had ridden up to the cabin in Buzzard Gulch a moment before, just as the rays of the morning sun first began peeping into the place.

A low "come in," uttered with an effort, had been the response to his knock, and he had entered, to be surprised to find the owner of the cabin pale and wounded on the couch, with no sign of the presence of his fair daughter.

"What does this mean?" was the quick question, as he looked down upon the pain-contracted features upturned to him in recognition and welcome. "Who has been here, and where is Clara?"

James Wilkes groaned and raised his hand to his head.

"It was done last night—I don't know who by. Clara was carried off, I suppose."

"But tell me all—the particulars, Mr. Wilkes. By heavens! I'll take the trail to the rescue at once."

Too weak to rise, and almost too weak to talk, the old man with difficulty told his story.

"The first of it all was, I went to Tenderfoot last evening to inspect the camp, to see what the property appeared like that we had come here to secure. Although I made sure I was not followed, when almost home I became aware of the presence of a pursuer. It ok a shot at his dark form and turned him back. But the mischief had been done—the cabin had been discovered."

"A few hours later the door was assailed with rocks, evidently in expectation of my rushing outside to shoot the disturber. I was too wise for that, and stationed myself at the loop-hole there and caught sight of the enemy in the dark shadows of the cliff. He fell when I shot, and thinking I was safe in then showing myself, went out. But his fall was a strategy; he sprang up the moment I stepped into the moonlight, apparently unhurt, and I got a bullet in the head."

"Who was the night wolf?—the cowardly assassin?"

"I don't know. A man of large figure."

"And did you know nothing after you were shot?"

"Not a thing. I fell in front of the door, and knew nothing for I don't know how long. When I came to my senses I found a cushion under my head and a cloth on my wound, showing that some one had been kind to me. I managed to crawl in here to my bed, and I found that Clara was gone. I fear that she is in trouble, Dan. The man who shot me must have carried her off. Great God! If I had known this, I never would have left Texas! May I be forgiven!"

Captain Sure Shot's teeth closed like a steel-trap.

"I will have her back unharmed, or I will make the Nugget country a dark and bloody ground," he promised the suffering father. "By my life! I'll have vengeance fer every hair of her head that is injured. I'm off on the trail at once. I know full well who is at the bottom of this—Mountain George of the Silver Range! Woo to him!"

He went on:

"You don't know the exact time that the wolf came?"

"No—it was before midnight; neither Clara nor I had retired."

"They've hours the start, but so much the worse for the wolf! It was a bad night's business, as will be found out!"

The mad Pard turned his eyes away from the pale face a short time, busy with speculations and plans.

Then suddenly he turned again to the old man.

"Five minutes to doctoring you, and then—to Tenderfoot! I can do much to heal wounds as well as make them. Ab! It was a bad shot."

The Champion Regulator may have been a

practicing surgeon in his time; certainly he understood the work of bandaging a bad wound on the head.

"You will live long to love your daughter, is my opinion," he said, when the job was accomplished. "Remain quiet and I think you will not be seriously ill. And now—good-by. You have your weapon there—shoot if you are molested. I will find your daughter!"

A dozen resolute steps took the Arizona Regulator to his horse, and springing to the saddle, he was away at a rattling speed.

He was aroused if a man ever was aroused.

He had been keeping a watchful eye on Buzzard Gulch, but visiting the cabin this morning without the slightest intimation of the bad work there the night before, he had been more than surprised to learn the state of affairs, and the news had been a heavy blow to him.

He made straight for Tenderfoot, for he felt that there the girl had been taken if kidnapped by Mountain George or any of his minions.

He never drew rein until stopped near the western edge of Nugget Valley by the sound of a sudden shot some distance ahead, at a point where the trail ran through a small timbered district.

"That was not meant for me," he concluded, after a moment spent in a listening attitude. I am sure I hear horses going the other way. "I will ride on and investigate."

Presently his animal shied at the body of a man lying across the trail.

"Rough Rube, by the eternal!" he ejaculated. "Some imp from Satan's Paradise has shot him. Pay fer it he shall."

He spoke to his horse and dashed ahead. Once free of the timber and not far in advance he beheld a rough he knew in an instant, riding one horse and leading another. He was pursuing his way leisurely, until he heard the rattle of hoofs behind him and turning, recognized the chief of Regulators. Then he plied the spurs and dashed ahead at the top of his animal's speed.

The dark-haired Regulator was bent on another stroke for vengeance, and his coal-black steed gained at every bound.

He knew Rough Rube's assassin to be Pistol Matt, one of the Marked Thirteen, and one of the worst characters that escaped the balter in the Silver Range.

"Hyer's fer vengeance!" the mad sport suddenly called out, raising his weapon. "The work goes on, and you've placed yourself next on the list, Pistol Matt!"

The Tenderfoot desperado answered with a defiant oath. He drew in his horse, and clutching his revolver, attempted to turn and drop his foe.

But Captain Sure Shot's finger was at the trigger, and following his shot Pistol Matt tumbled from his saddle.

"One more stroke in the interest of justice," said the victor grimly. "He is down for good, but what of Rough Rube?"

He turned his horse and soon was bending over his Tenderfoot ally.

The rough was only wounded, and ere long was in a condition to talk. Pistol Matt's bullet had fortunately done little more than stun him.

"I avenged the shot," said the Champion Regulator. "Pistol Matt paid dearly for his cowardly work. How was it?"

"A sneakin' ambush," was the reply. "I war ridin' through hyer an' war dropped without a moment's warnin'."

The big miner staggered to his feet and supported himself against a tree.

Captain Sure Shot remounted his horse.

"I will go and try to ketch your animal," he said, turning again to the wounded man; then suddenly: "What is it, Rough Rube? Your eyes say you know something."

"Right yo are, pard. I war follerin' this trail ter find yer."

"Out with it then. I'm on the trail that permits of no unnecessary delays. I've started to beard the lion in his den!"

"Are yer huntin' caliker, cap'n?" ventured the rough.

"You bet! What do you know?"

Rough Rube came a step nearer his handsome captain with a proud smile on his face.

"She's found, cap'n," he responded.

The Champion Regulator leaped forward in his saddle and his hand clutched like a vise Rough Rube's shoulder.

"Tell me what you know," he commanded.

"All right—but thunder, cap'n! thet's my shoulder. Ease up a little. Ov course yer want ther news an' yer shell hev it; but thet grip ov yours would paralyze a bull."

Captain Sure Shot relinquished the rough

man's shoulder, but his look was still a command.

"I hev this ter say," Rough Rube went on to inform the Regulator. "Ther gal is in Tenderfoot—in good banas. There was a pistol-shot near my cabin las' night, an' though I'm not often disturbed by such a customary thing I buckled on my shooters an' went out ter see what I could see. Knock me out fer a white-livered catamount, cap'n, ef I didn't observe a gal a-runnin' fer her life, an' Bowie Joe after her. I war too astonished ter move fer a little, fer I thought there warn't a female this side ov Tucson, much less in Tenderfoot. Bowie Joe caught her in a jiffy; an' then he an' Mountain George took her ter Mountain's cabin. The shot I hed heard had been fired by Mountain, an' hed laid out Brazen Bill fer keeps!"

"But how came the girl there?" interrupted the captain. "Who took her from Buzzard Gulch?"

"I'll give yer ther story," said Rough Rube, and he related all that had occurred to Clara Wilkes from the moment of the attack of Brazen Bill to the time of her incarceration by Mountain George and Bowie Joe.

"How do you know all this? You say the girl is safe—where is she?"

"Jes' a minit, cap'n," replied the Tenderfoot. "Yer see, when I saw ther gal taken ter Mountain George's cabin I thought ther must be somethin' wrong, ez she hed been tryin' ter escape from them. S', arter while, when Mountain went off ter roost, leavin' Bowie Joe ter guard ther gal's cabin, me an' one ov my pards went round ter investigate. A good lick on ther head with a sixer laid out the guard, an' we went in ter ther little gal. She war in a dead faint when we found her. We took her ter my cabin an' I made her comfortable. Two ov us then watched ther ranch all night. When mornin' come she war all right, an' she told me ther hull story ov her comin' ter Tenderfoot. She wanted me ter go ter you an' bring you thar, ter take her back ter her father. So I started, an' hyer I am."

"But Clara, the girl—you say she is safe now?"

"Thar are nearly eighty good, six-shooters in Tenderfoot ther says she is. Ther pards ther swore on ther trail las' night ter stand by yer meant every word ov it, Sure Shot."

"What is the state of affairs in the camp? Does Mountain George mean to fight for the girl?"

"He don't know what's become on her. He war ready ter shoot Bowie Joe fer lettin' her git away, an' he don't know who got her no more'n ther boss. They ov course are inclined ter think you are ther one ther got her. Mountain is b'ilin' mad. Ther camp is quiet, my pards a-hangin' round ready ter fight fer ther beauty of she's diskivered. Thar are half a dozen watchin' her cabin on ther quiet, an' ther first man ther opens her door will drop like a beef."

"Ther boys are more'n anxious ter hear ther whistle," Rough Rube continued. "Major Hank, one ov ther best pards ther swore on ther trail las' night, war found dead on his cabin floor this mornin'. I sp'icion that my cabin war visited sometime durin' ther night by ther same assassin, but I warn't ter home, which ar' good fer ther assassin. I suppose it was Pistol Matt, who laid fer me ter-day. We're sp'ilin' fer ther ball ter open, cap'n."

Captain Sure Shot grasped the big miner by the hand.

"Your talk is good!" he exclaimed. "Thank God the girl is all right! You have my eternal gratitude, Rube. You will have reward for all this. Let's go to her at once."

Rube hesitated, and dropped his eyes for a moment.

"I've been thinkin', cap'n," he said, "ther maybe it wouldn't be fer ther best ter take ther gal away in ther light ov day. Thar's liable ter be trouble, yer know, maybe a fight, which might break up a scheme ther Mountain George hez on foot fer ter-night. He an' his crowd mean ter waylay ther Pards on ther trail in ther mountains as ye'l' comin' ter Tenderfoot, ez they know yer will be ez soon ez it is night. Thar'll be enough bullets ter down ev'ry Pard ther first round. We're not asleep in Tenderfoot, an' we learned ov ther job this mornin'. Considerin' this is what made me say not ter stir up ther toughs ter-day by goin' inter ther camp an' expose ther gal by takin' her away, but let 'em go ahead with ther little game. Ef they leave ther camp, it will be a trap fer ther own doom, cap'n; can't yer see ther?"

Rube spoke rapidly and earnestly. It was clear that he was not lacking in allegiance to those whom he had sworn to support.

Captain Sure Shot was thoughtful for a moment.

"You are quite right, Rube," he said at last. "I shall not provoke a scrimmage in Tenderfoot to-day by exposing the Texas flower to the Satan's own crowd. I'll send one of the Pards to spend the day at Buzzard Gulch. I only hope this—that Mountain George and his forty desperadoes will be fools enough to leave their camp to-night and lay in ambush for us on the mountain trail. If they do, the work of vengeance will go on by the wholesale!"

CHAPTER XV.

TWO SHOTS AND A LIE.

As on the day preceding, the daylight hours witnessed the reign of quiet and order in Tenderfoot.

The friends of Mountain George spent the time at the Pickpocket, which place was generally avoided by their sworn enemies, Rough Rube's friends.

Few words were exchanged by the two factions. By this time the men were so open in their movements that it was known which side every man in the camp favored.

Many tigerish looks were given and received on both sides, but no disturbance occurred, although it was evident that such a state of affairs could not long exist in the camp where men were so ready to settle their differences with the revolver. Matters might be precipitated at any time with dire results. The crisis could not be long off.

The death of Major Hank at once aroused the righteous indignation of the honest men of the camp, and it was only with difficulty, stirred up as they already were, that they restrained themselves from seeking satisfaction at once. That Major Hank met his death at the instigation of Mountain George was a foregone conclusion.

But they swallowed their rage and resentment, and contented themselves with watching and waiting for the moment when they should be called upon to avenge their wrongs, as well as the wrongs of others.

The door of Rough Rube's cabin did not stand open during any part of the day, and there never was a moment passed that a number of Rough Rube's friends were not in easy pistol range of the cabin, secretly guarding it.

Mountain George was the most dissatisfied man in the Nugget country. The "theft" of the girl, by the Sure Shot Pards, as he thought, made life very bitter to him that day. He did a great deal of drinking and swearing.

It was early in the afternoon when the desperado might have been observed leaning against the logs of a cabin on the northeastern outskirts of Tenderfoot.

Captain Sure Shot had been seen to enter the town, and the rough was awaiting his return.

The Champion Regulator had visited Rube's cabin as he thought undiscovered, but the sharp eyes of one of Mountain George's spies had been upon him.

The boss of the camp had been drinking more than was good for his nerves, but that he had not lost confidence in his ability to shoot was shown by the fact that his hand continued to rest on the butt of a big revolver in his belt.

He stood about fifty yards from Rube's abode, behind the last cabin to be passed in quitting Tenderfoot. He watched with interest the door where the Regulator was expected to make his exit, but—

With no less interest was Mountain George himself being watched!

"I'll show ther champion galoot of the Rockies ther he can't enter this camp in open day at his own sweet will ez ef he war ther owner, an' never git a sixer shoved inter his face," muttered the desperado. "By Jerusalem! when he rides from ther cabin he rides ter his death! He an' Rough Rube hed better hold ther consultations somewhere else. I allow no noonday parades in Tenderfoot, unless, by thunder, it's a funeral! I intended ther shoot ther boss kiote in ther mountains by moonlight, but I kin do ther job now by sunlight, an' tend ter his pards ter-night."

An hour passed and the big Arizonian grew impatient.

"Why don't the Champion come?" he growled. "By Satan! I'm anxious ter settle my bill with him. I want ter pay off old scores an' all interest with one good .44 shot. Hang me fer an Apache ef I don't believ he's concluded ter begin housekeepin' hyer!"

"I'll not keep you waiting any longer!" all at once fell on the lurking desperado's ear. "By George, Mountain! You're made of patience!"

The Tenderfoot had just time to turn half

round when he was seized from behind by the neck and left arm in a grip that made him writhe with pain.

He felt his feet leave the ground and he was jerked up like a sack of oats and thrown across the neck of a horse whose rider laughed aloud as he held him helpless before him.

The animal started off at a gallop, his muffled hoofs making scarcely a sound as they struck the trail.

"It's a little trick we have—Vulcan and I," said the triumphant Regulator as the gold camp was left rapidly behind. "You forgot, Mountain, that Rough Rube's cabin has a back door, and that his stable is not two feet from it. Did you expect to see horse and rider come out the front door? There's nothing like a little surprise, you know. Ride into the mountains a piece with me, will you? There's splendid scenery ahead."

Mountain George was not clear in his own mind what he would do, but the prospects were that he would accept the invitation and ride into the mountains with his foe.

A struggling hope passed through his mind that Bowie Joe or some of his pards would see his danger and rescue him by a timely bullet; but the black steed of the Regulator traveled at a fast gait, and the haunts of the desperadoes were being left in the rear, so that the chance of any intervention was becoming poorer each instant.

The would-be assassin was in a most uncomfortable position. Lying across the neck of the horse the traveling was exceedingly rough, and besides, his neck was still in that terrible clutch he had cause to know so well. His captor gave a merciless laugh and tightened his grip when he made an effort to free himself. The rough was decidedly *hors de combat*, and he soon ceased to struggle. But his mind was active with plans to turn the tables when a chance should be presented.

Up into the mountains dashed the ebony charger with its double burden—the two deadly enemies. Captain Sure Shot ceased to talk, and on his handsome face settled an expression that would have made strong men tremble, as he surveyed the rough, ungainly form of his captive foe. The look was one of undying hatred, and boded ill to the one at whom it was directed.

Finally the horse was drawn to a halt, and Mountain George felt the steel-like fingers removed from his neck. He was allowed to fall to the ground, and he experienced a rich sense of relief. Then, with every faculty recovered, his right hand went to his belt, but the weapon sought was not in its place. It had been dexterously extracted during the ride.

The Arizonian Regulator watched his movement with orbs that seemed to penetrate his inmost thoughts. His attempt to use a weapon was met with a glance that spoke a menace as plain as words.

"I'll do the shooting!" came suddenly from the man on the horse. "Note that you are at my mercy, Mountain George. If I will, the Marked Thirteen will forever lose ther chief to-day. *Marked Thirteen!* By Heaven! you're not marked, Mountain, only in mind—you bear no marks to show that your day is set. You shall be marked!—when you lie in wait to assassinate the Champion Regulator it will cost you dear!"

The mountain giant's face all at once turned ashy pale, as succeeding the mad words a six-shooter came to a level with his head.

One instant of terrible suspense, and then two shots were quickly delivered, and the desperado staggered back with a cry like some wild beast. There was a bullet hole through each ear!

"Marked—and well done!" followed the shots in victorious tones. "You will never forget me now, Mountain, or that you are marked for vengeance. Your ears will be constant reminders that your doom is near."

The Champion Regulator seemed to be proud of the work of his unerring hand.

Into Mountain George's eyes came a look of fear and dread—well assumed. He seemed to lose his self-control and quake as does a dog in the presence of a stern master.

"Ye'r imposin' on a man ther means peace ter day, Cap'n Sure Shot," he said, as he came nearer to horse and rider. "Yer hev not given me a chance ter speak afore. I waited fer yer in Tenderfoot ter hev a truce an' make tarmos ov surrender with yer. By heaven! yer've marked me fer life jest at ther moment when I war ready ter throw down my shooters an' ask yer mercy."

He was given no reply, except a look he could not fathom.

"I've concluded thar's no use ter keep up a one-sided fight any longer," he went on, "an'

ter Pard's hev agreed ter knuckle under. We made a big scoop an' got ther gal las' night, but she war gone when ther sun rose, an' we are ready ter cave in disgust. We had ter give in in ther Silver Range, an' we'll hev ter give in hyer. Three ov ther old boys hev passed in ther chips, an' things are gittin' too warm fer ther rest ov us. We want ter belt our shooters fer good, cap'n. We'll give up Tenderfoot an' leave, er work in ther mines er ther proper machinery is put in.

"It are my plan ter hev ther Sure Shot Pard's meet ther ten pard's ov ther old Silver Range hyer in ther mountains ter-night when ther moon comes up, ez yer met Rough Rube an' some ov ther boys las' night, an' we'll come ter tarms. In ther mean time, yer kin decide on ther tarms fer peace, an' we'll meet yer fa'r an' squar."

To all appearances Mountain George spoke with all the sincerity of the proverbial "Gospel sharp."

Captain Sure Shot well understood the rough's words, after what he had been told by Rough Rube earlier in the day; but not by word or smile did he show a doubt of the giant's honesty. On the contrary, the latter felt certain that his proposition had been favorably received.

"You have changed wonderfully," said the Regulator. "You have sworn to fight me to the death."

"Don't mention it, cap'n. We've come ter our senses. Ther's no use buckin' ag'in ther old Masked Regulators. Three ov ther pard's are gone already—"

"Four, Mountain," was the interruption. "Pistol Mott died in Nugget Valley to-day."

"Wal, four gone, an' it's only a question ov a short time when we will all get picked off. Ther's fifty on yer side ter less'n forty ov us, an' sech a fight is not healthy fer us, you bet. Now ter night ther nine ov us will come hyer—"

"Where will your other thirty pard's be?"

"In ther camp, o' course. They are willin' ter foller any tarms ther we make."

"Well, the Sure Shot Pard's will be on hand here to-night," said Captain Sure Shot, evidently falling in with the whole plan, much to the rough's inward delight. "I'll dictate the terms then. Now, remember, this is square business."

"Sartin, Pard Cap'n. Mountain George will do whatever he agrees."

"It's settled then," concluded the champion. "You can go back to the camp, Mountain."

The big mountaineer did not wait for further words, but turned his bloody face toward the town at the foot of the mountain trail and strode away.

"Thar's nothin' like a lie well told, after all!" escaped his lips ere he was ten yards away. "Thet lie means vengeance fer ther devil shots ther hev sp'iled my beauty!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WORK OF VENGEANCE.

In the soft summer twilight twenty-five typical Arizonian desperadoes stood on the far outskirts of Tenderfoot, with their backs toward the camp. Mountain George was giving some final instructions to a man who was on the point of turning back.

"Thar's fifteen men left in the burg, an' they're ter keep ther eyes peeled, *don't fergit thet!* Watch Rough Rube an' his pard's like hawks an' shoot ther first man ther attempts ter leave ther town. We don't want nothin' ter do with ther gang ter-night. We'll clean out the Sure Shot Pard's, an' then Rough Rube an' about forty kites like him will come in fer a settlement. By Judas! ther closer they stick ter ther shanties ter-night ther better it will be fer them! They've got ter lay low on this occasion, an' it's ther duty ov ther fifteen ter see thet they do. Go back ter ther Pickpocket now, an' see thet thar's guards in every part ov ther camp. Ef yer blunder, by Jerusalem! yer'll never see ther sun rise!"

The boss of Tenderfoot turned toward the mountains and at the word the twenty-four began their march.

They did not appear as if they were bent on a mission of peace. Their belts might have been taken for small arsenals, and an observer would have remarked that the band looked more like they were going forth to battle than to surrender.

The nine who remained of the Marked Thirteen were in the advance. They were going to fulfill their appointment to meet the Sure Shot Pard's in the mountains when the moon rose, but, contrary to agreement, they were accompanied by fifteen stalwart toughs, who looked able to cope with an equal number of men of any ability.

This was Mountain George's plan to dispatch his relentless enemies at one telling stroke. He had attended to every detail most carefully and he believed that to-night Tenderfoot bullets would be successful in compassing the death of the Sure Shot Pard's.

The men of Tenderfoot had left the camp in the quietest manner possible, stealing out one by one and congregating in an isolated cabin, and when they turned toward the mountains, as darkness fell, with oaths on their lips and revolvers in their hands, they felt confident that their plans and their movements were unknown to any enemy.

They walked rapidly, wasting as little time as possible. Mountain George addressed his pard's in mad tones as they advanced.

"We swore ter Cap'n Sure Shot thet ther Masked Regulators hed come ter ther Nugget kentry ter die," he sent over his shoulders. "an' ter-night we'll keep thet oath. Ef they hit this trail ter-night they'll be turned inter a wolves' feast in ther time a cat winks. Thet means good times again in Tenderfoot, with a queen wuth all ther wealth in ther territory. We shell hev no fallin' ter-night, pard's. When we think ov ther queen we kin hit ther mark twelve times out ov a dozen. My ears are in a sling, but eye an' hand kin be depended on yet. Jebu! we'll hev a good while ter wait till ther moon rises; but ther Pard's may be along at any time, an' it are our bizness ter be on hand. Sooner er later thar'll be some rough work in these mountains ter-night."

The Tenderfoot desperado spoke with perfect truth—there would indeed be some rough work in these mountains to-night. But the tide was to take a different turn from what he expected.

The men of Camp Tenderfoot never made a greater mistake than to quit their stronghold for the mountains, when they had for enemies men of such wonderful faculties as the Sure Shot Pard's. They should have known that the Champion Regulator was not one to be entrapped in such a way, except by accident. He knew the nature of Arizona desperadoes too well to believe that they had all at once decided upon an unconditional surrender. And the Marked Thirteen especially should have known the man well enough to realize that the only terms possible would be death to them, for the champions of the right had sworn to have their lives in the interests of justice.

Mountain George, however, was taking every precaution. He was entering the mountains hours in advance of the meeting time, in anticipation of any early trips which the enemy might make to Tenderfoot, and he lacked neither arms nor men for a complete and instant annihilation of the ten the moment they appeared in range, if nothing disastrous occurred to prevent.

At the meeting-point the deadly ambush was prepared. Mountain George had planned for every emergency, the original design being, if the Pard's did not pass before the hour appointed, for the Marked Thirteen to present themselves in an attitude of surrender, and while engaging the Regulators in discussion of the terms, the concealed men, at a signal, to fire a round which was expected to empty every saddle.

But ah! "the best laid plans of mice and men aft gang agley."

While the two dozen desperadoes of Tenderfoot waited with unabated patience and eagerness for the hour that was destined to witness one of the wildest scenes in the history of Arizona, movements were on foot which would have caused Mountain George to instantly desert the place of ambush had he known of them.

Captain Sure Shot was master of every point of the situation. He had determined that the work of this night should be the great final stroke in the work of vengeance.

Rough Rube had his orders, and he was not the man to fail at the critical moment.

The pale moon at last came up, and its silvery beams were soon dispelling the shades in the recesses of the Arizona Mountains. Ere long eight dark men, who sat astride dark steeds in a pass a mile northeast of the Tenderfoot ambush, were joined by a ninth man, who said:

"Ther pigeon's in ther trap, ready to be sprung and brought down, cap'n."

"Rough Rube—"
"—and twenty pard's are waitin' for ther whistle, in pistol range ov Mountain George."

"Then all is ready for the last move. Nothin' could have been more successful than we have been thus far to-night. Lieutenant Dodge and the two Tenderfoot pard's have doubtless long since reached Buzzard Gulch with Clara, and I dare say the ten men who escaped our bullets in the camp two hours ago are endeavoring

to leave the Nugget country as far behind as possible at this moment. We have now the simple task of administering justice to the worst crowd of roughs in the Southwest. The cards for the game are in hand, let us play well and sweep the boards clean."

Horses whose hoofs are muffled make little noise, and when Captain Sure Shot gave the word, the dark band moved forward like threatening specters.

Twenty minutes later Rough Rube and twenty broad-shouldered athletes of his own stripe, who were waiting silently on the rock-walled trail between Tenderfoot and the mountain ambush, responded with eager exclamations to a shrill, peculiar whistle that awoke the echoes for miles. Their huge revolvers were drawn and the men went forward to the fray on the quickstep. They had taken but a few noiseless strides when their weapons were raised and a score of bullets were poured into the places of concealment of their ambushed foes.

The shots were answered by wild cries, and the toughs of Tenderfoot sprung erect to meet the unexpected assault.

At that moment the deadly surprise was made complete by the appearance from the opposite direction of a band of riders who were instantly recognized. They charged down upon the desperadoes with a thrilling yell of triumph, and each crack of their weapons wrought a link in the great chain of vengeance.

The shots with which the minions of Satan replied were few and ineffective, and the shout of defiance and hatred which they attempted to raise died away into one of dismay and terror, as they fled precipitately. But the enemy seemed to be everywhere. There was no evading the Sure Shot Pard's, and the effort to escape in most cases was fruitless.

Mountain George, the king of desperadoes, was overtaken in his flight by a detaining hand which jerked him from his feet to the neck of a horse in a manner he had experienced once before. He knew at once that he was at the mercy of that terrible Regulator.

"There's no escape for the varmint of Arizona!" was hissed in his ear. "Vengeance demands your venomous and worthless life!"

Rough hands assisted him to the ground, a noose was adjusted around his neck, and he was swung up to the limb of a tree even as he had swung up the innocent owner of Tenderfoot's gold.

Thus the last scene in the wild mountain tragedy was ended.

Captain Sure Shot had no difficulty in proving that James Wilkes and his daughter were the possessors of the richest portion of Tenderfoot and the property was at once placed in their control. Mr. Wilkes, under the skillful care of his devoted daughter soon recovered, and was able to conduct the sale of most of the property. One mine which he retained yielded handsomely, and when, in the course of a few months, after amply repaying the men who had so nobly espoused his cause, he departed for his old home in Texas in company with his daughter and Captain Sure Shot, he left Rough Rube in absolute control.

Dan Darkley—Captain Sure Shot—had known the Wilkes family in former years, before his roving tendency had taken him into the wilds of Arizona, and his attachment for the beautiful Clara, and hers for him, was but a revival of their old affection.

Dan turned over the captaincy of the brave Pard's to Lieutenant Dodge, and they were long the terror of the law-breakers of the Southwest.

The old captain was now ready to settle down and enjoy the love and wifely attentions of one of the fairest flowers of Texas, and they live today blessed in all their relations of life.

Bowie-Knife Joe and the remainder of the notorious Marked Thirteen were victims of avenging bullets on the night of that disastrous ambush, and the element they typified was never afterward an obnoxious feature of the storied mountain camp.

Brazen Bill, the giant of "blue blood," forever postponed his trip to Tucson, for he lost his life at the hands of the man to whom he was traitor.

Tenderfoot, peaceful and prosperous, is not called Tenderfoot now on the maps, but many of its citizens, prominent among whom is Rough Rube, can well remember when it was known as Mountain George's camp, and the chief of desperadoes and his associates were overtaken by just retribution.

THE END.

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